Against the Flow

December, 2001

One of the Thai idioms for meditating is mekhin, an effort, tamkvambhiyin. And it’s important that we make right effort as we meditate. You look at the Buddha’s analysis of right effort, there’s got to be desire, there’s got to be persistence, there’s got to be intent, and there’s really focusing on what you’re doing. In order for the meditation to go someplace, it’s not simply a matter of just sitting there and watching what’s going to happen on its own, or just going with the flow. Many times you have to go against the flow. Because where does the flow of the world take you? It takes you on a joyride for a while and then dumps you down with aging, illness, and death. Then it starts up again and ends up the same old place over and over and over again. Another Thai idiom for the way people go through samsara is you go swimming through samsara. But it’s not a nice swimming pool. It’s a torrent. And sometimes it’ll wash you up in little pools here and there where it seems relatively quiet. And then it grabs hold of you again and washes you down someplace else, over through rapids and over waterfalls. So if you simply go with the current, you just keep going the same old place over and over again. There’s got to be an element where you’re going against the current. When distraction comes in, it takes over the mind. When discouragement comes in, it takes over the mind. There has to be an element where you go against the current. That requires strength. Last night we made the comparison with going down to the gym and exercising. It’s the same way here. You need a certain level of strength in order to do the exercises to begin with. And then as you do the exercises, it takes that strength and it multiplies it, makes it even stronger. There has to be some level of mindfulness and some level of concentration before you can actually sit down and meditate. Some little determination. You want to make a change in the mind. Because you look at the way your mind is right now, and there’s a lot of unfinished business that holds for all of us here. And the question is, are you going to leave that unfinished business unfinished and just go through the rest of your life with a lot of the unimportant work done and with the important work not done? Or are you going to decide, okay, now’s the time to do the important work, to take care of these currents that come flowing out of the mind. The Buddha uses the word asava, which means effluence or fermentation. These things come bubbling up in the mind all the time. Sensual desire, views, states of becoming, ignorance. These things just keep bubbling up all the time. If we don’t watch out, they turn into floods. There’s another passage where the Buddha calls these things floods. In other words, when the effluent really takes over, it’s just going to drown you. You can drown in sensual desire. You get drowned in your own views. You get drowned in these little worlds that the mind creates for itself, that they call states of becoming. And you drown in your ignorance. Simply learn how to swim against the current. This is what we’re doing as we’re mindful, catching the mind each time it wants to go along with those old currents, pulling it back. But to do this, you have to create some new states of becoming. This is what we’re doing as we meditate. There is an element of creation in meditation that’s really important. Creating a really comfortable breath, creating a really nice spot for the mind to settle down, creating good attitudes, creating a sense of appreciation for these things so that they have a chance to grow. Because all too often, little tiny states of being that can be useful in the terms of the meditation come popping up. But in the beginning, they seem so weak and unimpressive that you pass right over them. But if you take the time to look at them and nurture them a little bit, they begin to grow. It’s what was just an ordinary breathing pattern suddenly becomes more and more comfortable, or a state of mind that seems kind of neutral and nothing outstanding, nothing to catch your attention. But if you pay a little attention to it, you begin to find that it can grow and become more and more solid. So in order to get beyond these states of becoming, where the mind just gets lost in its little worlds, you have to create worlds through your concentration, states of mind, states of being, that even though they may not last forever, at least give the mind strength. They give the mind a place to rest and gather its energies, get perspective on things. That’s where the effort lies. In other words, it’s not the kind of effort that just wears you out, but it’s the kind of effort that gives you more and more strength. The more effort you put into it, the more strength you get out of it. That’s right effort in the course of the meditation. So as you’re meditating, you’ll find that good states of mind come floating by, bad states of mind come floating by. There’s this tendency to want to jump at the good ones to begin with. After a while, you begin to realize that every time you jump on them, it’s like jumping on a cloud. You just go right through. Then you get to discouraged. You say, “Well, I’m not going to care about anything at all. I’m just going to watch things as they come and go, come and go.” And it gets very dry. What’s required is that you take more care to notice, “Okay, when these things come, how do they come?” If you watch again and again and again, you begin to notice patterns. “Okay, when they come, what do you do to maintain them?” The effort to maintain is somewhat different from the effort to create. The Buddha actually talks about giving rise to skillful states of mind that haven’t arisen. That’s one type of effort. Another one is, once the states are there, how you cultivate them, how you make them grow. It’s slightly different each time. So try to notice that difference so that when little pleasant states of mind come along as you’re meditating, “Okay, take advantage of them.” It’s not the case that you have to be afraid of getting stuck on them. There’s an important part in the Buddha’s own practice when he says that for so long, when he was afraid of every form of pleasure, he was going to deny himself every kind of pleasure that presented itself to him, whether it was physical or mental. He just wore himself out. That wasn’t the path. He reflected on the pleasure that comes from concentration, the pleasure that comes from absorption. There are no dangers to them. There are no drawbacks, because they create in the mind a clear state, unlike ordinary pleasures, which tend to cloud the mind. So you want to foster those clear little states. They get stronger and stronger, so they begin to take over. They bring you to a current that goes in another direction, out of this wandering around that you’ve been doing. So you have to be very particular about where you look for pleasure. Most pleasures tend to blind you. When we look at our country over the past couple of decades, a lot of people get well off. But there is a sense, “Well, everybody’s well off.” But it’s not true. There’s a lot of poverty in this country. Yet when people themselves get well off, they tend to get blinded to the problems of other people. We don’t have to speak about people on the other side of the world, even people who live right nearby. There’s a lot of poverty, there’s a lot of suffering going on. But most people, when they get some pleasant position in life and physical pleasures and material pleasures, they tend to be blind. And then when someone wakes them up from that blindness, they don’t like it. That’s the way it is with ordinary pleasure, which is why the Buddha was afraid of it for so long. But then he realized, “Okay, it’s not all pleasures are that way. There’s a pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind, a sense of well-being that comes when you have a good, solid place to stay inside.” Okay, that’s not blinding. That actually clears the mind, if you decide to put the use in that way. So these little pleasures that come along, again, it’s a question of skill, how you relate to them. A sense of well-being that comes simply from breathing in a way that feels good and letting the mind settle down in a way that feels good with the breath. Notice how you do that. Okay, once it’s there, how do you maintain it? How does it grow? And then once you’ve found that you can maintain it for a little bit, see how much longer you can maintain it, the tricks that are required there. All the tricks in meditation, it’s like the tricks of any kind of skill, the little things that you have to notice for yourself. The big principles can be taught, but the little ones that are really so essential are things that you have to observe on your own. But don’t be afraid of the pleasure that comes along. Just learn the right attitude towards it so you don’t destroy it by getting too excited about it, or that you don’t ignore it by getting too blasé. Learn how to be discerning in how you approach the issue of pleasure and pain, because that’s what the Buddhist path is all about, is having real discernment in this issue. So you can see what different kinds of pleasure there are, what different kinds of pain there are, physical and mental, the ordinary pain of just the fact that things change, and then the pain that you add to that basic level of pain through your attachment. These are the things you want to be very clear about. It’s amazing what an important issue pleasure and pain are in our lives, and yet how undiscerning we are. We’re very blurry on these distinctions. One of the basic tasks of the meditation is to learn how to get very clear about them. So you can find which kinds of pain are useful, which ones are not, which kinds of pleasure are useful, which ones are not. In other words, we learn not to look at pleasure and pain as ends in and of themselves, but as more tools for the path, tools for awakening, tools for release. you

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