Patience

December, 2001

When you practice concentration, you have to put aside all the books you’ve been reading. And that includes all the dharma you’ve been learning as well. Because if you keep thinking about, “Is this jhana yet? Is this samadhi yet?” It’s like trying to dance while you have a dance manual in your hand. Keep stopping to check, “Okay, what’s the next step?” And the next step, and the next step, and the next step. It interferes in the rhythm and it interferes in the flow. So when you sit down to meditate, there just has to be you and the object that you want to focus on. The breath, or any other part of the body. Or if you want to focus on the word Buddha, just stay with Buddha. You don’t have to think of anything else. If you’re staying with the breath, it’s just the breath coming in and going out. And there are a few questions you want to ask yourself, but not too many. Keep things limited just to, “Okay, am I with the breath? Is it comfortable? If it’s not comfortable, how about if I change it a little bit here, change it a little bit there?” And then sit with it for a while and watch. If that doesn’t seem quite right, okay, then change it a little bit and then watch again for a while. Don’t be too quick to change from one thing to another unless it’s very obvious that things are not working out. So those are the basic questions. Okay, is it comfortable and what am I doing? Okay, what can I change that I’m doing if it’s not comfortable enough? That’s pretty much all you have to ask yourself. Because just this much can take you a long way in the meditation. In other words, as the mind settles down, okay, if it feels good, just stay with it. You don’t have to change anything. And no matter how stupid it may seem, you’re saying, “Well, when are the insights going to come?” Well, it’s not time yet. You don’t want to push things too fast. All too often we say, “Well, I only have X number of days or X number of hours to meditate, so I want to push as much through as possible.” This often happens on meditation retreats. One retreat I was teaching at IMS one time, it was a team-taught retreat. Halfway through the retreat, the leader of the team said, “Okay, now we’re going to switch from concentration to vipassana.” I said, “Well, look, the people are not ready yet. We’re halfway through the retreat. You’ve got to switch.” That’s much too artificial. Things have to develop at their own pace. So while you’re sitting here, you can’t even think about how many more days, how many more hours, how many more minutes in this session. All those things get in the way of the practice. Just simply focus on what you’re doing. Don’t try to anticipate too much. You’ve read that there are four stages of jhana. Have you reached the first one yet? Have you reached the second? Don’t even think about that. It’s okay. Am I with the breath? Is it comfortable? Can I stay continually with the breath? How long can I keep this going? In the beginning, you find that the mind settles down with a kind of rhythm. It’ll stay with the breath for a little while and then go off, then come back and then go off. What you want to do at first is to make those periods when you’re with the breath just longer and longer. Then you begin to notice where the breath is between the phrases. Can you keep focus right through that period when the mind would normally withdraw a little bit? Try to keep it continuous from one breath to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next, in, out, in, out, without shifting. It takes a little bit of pressure to keep the mind with the breath this way, but you don’t want it to be so much that it begins to constrict the breath or make it uncomfortable. But it’s just these really basic questions. Okay, is it comfortable? Am I steadily with it? Okay, then just maintain that until you find that it’s noticeable, that it’s not comfortable. Okay, then you change. That’s all you have to think about right now. Don’t clutter your mind up with other things. Whatever else comes your way at this point, you don’t need it. Just let it pass. Let it pass. Let it pass. You’re going to stay with the breath. You’re going to hold on. Have respect for this practice. In other words, don’t drop the breath lightly. Don’t have that attitude that some people develop towards concentration. “Well, I don’t want to be attached to it, so I’ll just let it come and go on its own.” That doesn’t work either. You’ve got to develop the path. If you have a really casual, lackadaisical attitude towards the concentration practice, you’ll never get anywhere. Because that attitude, “Well, if it comes, it comes. If it doesn’t come, it doesn’t come,” that’s the ordinary attitude throughout the world. You’ve got to have respect for what you’re doing. We talk about having respect for concentration in one of the phrases in the chant we just had right now. It means both respect for your own concentration and for the concentration of people around you, not only while you’re sitting here, but as you get up. Think of all the effort you went into. Many times at the end of the meditation session, as soon as the bell goes off, you think, “Okay, that’s it. Enough for tonight, until I get back to my place and I’ll meditate some more.” Well, you want to try to keep meditating in between times, too. It’s the meditation in the cracks that’s really important, because it’s in developing that ability to stay with the breath, no matter what comes. Here at the monastery, it’s rather gentle. You get up, and there’s just a little bowing down, and then you walk back. There’s not much to distract you, and yet we let ourselves get distracted really easily. You want to try to maintain that sense of center, no matter what happens. When you find that you can be maintained here, you try to deal with it in more difficult situations. Then you begin to notice what things outside disturb your concentration and what things inside disturb your concentration. You find there are certain things you just can’t think about, just can’t talk about. They’ll throw your concentration off track. So you have to learn restraint, because you’ve got something very valuable here. One of the images they have in the texts is of a person walking with a bowl brim filled with oil on top of his head. You can’t let the oil spill, even a drop. In the image, as soon as a drop of oil spills, somebody will cut your head off. So you try to maintain that balance as long as you can, as precisely as you can. You work so hard to get the mind to settle down. Well, keep it there. Allow it to stay there. Don’t just throw it away. This is one of the things that respect for concentration means. While you’re sitting here, it’s the same sort of thing. No matter what wonderful thoughts may come passing by, you don’t want to have anything to do with them at this point. If they’re really good, they’ll come back at times when they’re more appropriate. Right now, the appropriate action is to just stay with the breath. You don’t have any other responsibilities, any other thoughts that you have to tend to right now. It’s just this one skill. Just keep working at coming back to the breath. If you wander off, just keep coming back. If you’re with it, okay, what can you do to stay there as long as possible? Those are the only questions you have to concern yourself with right now. As for the more theoretical teachings, okay, there’ll be a point where they’re actually not theoretical anymore. They’re very directly related to what you’re doing. But you don’t have to push the matter. Just get the mind to settle down, and you begin to see what problems remain when the mind is still. The first problem, of course, is getting the mind to settle down. Once it’s settled down, what other problems are there? Well, maybe your sense of centeredness is not refined enough. Okay, you make it more refined. Maybe it’s not steady enough. You make it more steady. Maybe it’s getting dry and dreary. Okay, you try to lighten it up a bit. Make it more fun. There are ways of doing that. Once you learn how to master the concentration in different situations, then the next problems will come, and they will naturally relate to what the Buddha taught on these other levels. But when you deal with those other levels, when it’s still just abstractions, it becomes a distraction as well. So your immediate job is learning how to bring your awareness. Be mindful of the breath. Be alert to the breath. Have a certain sort of ardency in the practice that keeps with the breath. Have the same sort of attitude towards this as you would to developing any skill. On the one hand, you want to do well, but you notice that if you get too excited when it’s going well, or too upset when it’s not going well, that gets in the way of you doing it well. So try to develop the right sort of attitude. Okay, when things aren’t going well, what can you do to change them? When they are going well, stay with them. Then when the time comes to leave concentration, reflect on what you did to get there. Why was this particular session a good session? And then the next time you sit, you’ll try to remember what you did right and try it again. You may find that you need more adjustment, or maybe the state of mind has changed a little bit, so it’s going to require a different tactic. As you keep this attitude, you find that over time you begin to get a more intuitive sense of what’s going on in the mind. When the mind is tipping too far to the right, tipping too far to the left, whatever, you have a sense of bringing it back into balance. It’s developing that sense of balance. It takes time. It takes practice. You have to make a lot of mistakes, but they’re just par for the course. When you develop the right attitude, then you find that you’re also developing the factors you need, the mindfulness, the alertness. It becomes more and more instinctive. You’re getting more and more skillful at creating the right conditions in the mind. You can really apply the Buddha’s teachings on how to overcome suffering. They take on a new meaning. The Buddha talked about three levels of discernment. There’s the discernment that comes from reading. There’s the discernment that comes from thinking things through. That’s the preliminary level. It gets you ready to practice. Then real discernment comes from actually doing the practice. At that point, you put aside what you’ve read and thought about and just work on these qualities. You read about mindfulness. You read about alertness. Okay, well, now develop them. See what you learn about mindfulness and alertness as you put them into practice. You read about the Four Noble Truths. You’ll find there’s a point where the Four Noble Truths really do apply very specifically to what you’re doing. Actually, they apply all along the way. It’s just that your insight into this fact gets clearer and clearer. The Four Noble Truths just basically come down to those basic variables of learning how to develop a skill. What do you do that’s skillful that gives rise to good results? What do you do that’s unskillful that gives rise to bad results? Right there, you’ve got the framework for the Four Noble Truths. Skillful actions are the path. The results of skillful actions, again, the cessation of suffering. Unskillful actions, the cause of suffering. The results of unskillful actions, of course, suffering itself. That’s the basic framework. It’s just that you learn to apply it with more and more precision, more and more refinement as you go through the practice. So it comes down to those questions. Okay, what are you doing? What are the results? Should you change? If not, okay, just stick with what you’re doing. If you should change, well, use your ingenuity to figure out what will give better results and better results. Those are the only questions you have to ask. And you even find that when things are going well, you don’t have to ask too much. Just stay with them. You don’t have to be too intelligent at points like that. Just intelligent enough to keep things going right. I remember one time I was on alms round in Thailand, and I began to think to myself, “I’m trying to keep my mind still, still, still,” throughout everything. While I was doing my alms round, while I was eating, while I was doing my chores, while I was sitting and meditating, everything. A little voice inside came, “Hey, isn’t this being stupid?” And you have to say, “Well, I’m willing to be stupid for the time being.” If this is what it means, learning to keep the mind still, it’s a basic skill you’re going to need. In many ways, it’s like learning boxing. I learned Thai boxing when I was a layperson in Thailand. The first step they teach you is how to withdraw, how to retreat. Before they even teach you how to kick or hit or whatever, the first thing you need to know how to do is how to retreat. Okay, when things get bad, you have to be able to pull out fast. And you need the same talent when you’re dealing with your mind. As you’re working on questions of insight, you’ll find sometimes that you get carried away by your questions. And what seems to be inside of practice all of a sudden becomes just distraction, restlessness. That’s when you have to pull out, go back into stronger states of concentration. So it’s important you have this first step there to keep yourself safe no matter what happens. So even though it may seem kind of dumb sometimes, just keeping still, still, still, still, still, still, practicing equanimity, practicing patience, all those sort of camel virtues, the water buffalo virtues, still they are virtues, and they have their time and they have their place. So stay focused right here. There’s nowhere else you have to go right now. Nothing else you have to do. Just work on this one skill and you’ll get really proficient.

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