Accelerating the Practice

July, 2002

The rains retreat is about to begin. In another two days we’ll be making our determination. The monks will be making their determination to stay here for the three months through the full moon in October. Traditionally, this is a time for accelerating the practice. We try to keep the distractions in the monasteries down to the minimum. In other words, no big construction projects that the residents have to be involved in. An extra time devoted to meditation and study, with less moving around. And it’s a big job we have in front of us, our own minds. But if you think about it in terms like that, abstract terms like “your mind” or “you,” “your self-image,” whatever, the job just gets so big that you don’t know where to start. So it’s best to keep your mind away from abstractions and just focus on what’s actually there for you to notice, right in front of your eyes. Individual things happen. Abstractions don’t happen, but individual events do happen. And it’s in attacking the problem of suffering on the level of individual events, that’s how it can be taken apart, piece by piece, bit by bit, until finally you have the whole thing dismantled. I remember one time I was talking to a meditator who’d been to a retreat where the teacher had talked about seeing life in terms of the Absolute and the Relative, and trying to bring that perspective into your daily life. And she had a lot of questions about it. And what it came down to was it was really hard to decide what the Absolute was and what the Relative was. And the question that she phrased just got more and more convoluted until I couldn’t understand what she was getting at. And she didn’t know where she was going. So I had to point out to her that that was the problem in and of itself, that you couldn’t really get a handle on the terms. As a result, it wasn’t really a useful way of looking at the problem, which is, how do we cause unnecessary suffering, day by day, moment by moment? And because it’s a “how” question, it’s a question of skill. How do you look at things? How do you focus on things? How do you deal with things? How do you act? How do you speak? How do you think in ways that cause suffering? And then how do you do it in ways that don’t cause suffering? If you’re to break the Buddhist teachings down into their really most basic concepts, that’s when it comes down to a question of skill and lack of skill. And those are things that are developed step by step. As we were saying this afternoon, it requires a lot of patience. Most of us would like to come to the meditation already talented, just like we like to come to sports or music or other activities already talented. But even the really talented people have to work hard if they really want to excel. And it’s this ability to settle down and take things one at a time, like we’re meditating here, one breath at a time. If you try to focus on all the breaths that you’re going to have during this meditation, you can’t do it all at once. You do them one at a time. There, the breath is teaching a lesson right there. How do you relate to the breath in a way that brings added comfort to the body? Again, you have to take it one breath at a time. If you start getting mechanical about the ins and outs, trying to force it into a preconceived pattern, you miss everything that you’re going to learn in the meditation. You have to take it one breath at a time. Be really sensitive to how the needs of the body change, sometimes from breath to breath, how sometimes you need long breathing, sometimes followed by a short breath, followed by a medium breath, a deeper breath, and a more shallow breath. How are you going to learn these things? By taking the time to notice and getting a sense over time of what works and what doesn’t work. The same holds with any of the events that come up in the mind. We deal with fear, and we’d like to deal with it once and for all. Well, it comes back. Okay, when it comes back, is it coming back in the same way, or is it coming back in a different way? Because fears, even though they do have a kind of general pattern to them, they also have their individuality, and you have to be sensitive to both. And that sensitivity comes back. It comes from just having a lot of experience, really paying a lot of attention to each and every breath as it comes, each and every mental event as it comes. And you can put the two together. When anger comes, notice how your breath is affected by it. When fear comes, when lust comes, how is your breath affected? How is the way you hold the body? How are the patterns of tension in your body affected by these mental events? There’s something to learn and observe right there. Because right there lies one of the keys to how you can get around those events and not be affected by them. If you can breathe in a way that maintains a normalcy of breath energy in the body, it helps you to step outside of those thought patterns, step outside of those emotions. So you don’t feel swallowed up in them, and so you don’t feel like you’ve got to get them out in your actions. So take it one breath at a time. This is the essence of our skill. The Buddha once boiled his major teachings down to the Thirty-Seven Wings to Awakening. Notice all of those are related to the way you breathe. Everything is kept close to the ground. There are not a lot of big abstractions. You don’t have to worry about where the universe comes from or where it’s going. Because when you come right down to it, those are pretty irrelevant issues. What does it matter whether there was a Big Bang or it was a steady-state universe or all those other things that people get themselves worked up about? What matters is what you’re doing right now. It’s not like experiencing some novel that’s already been written that you’re just sitting here looking at, reading passively. You’re shaping it right now, every time you make a choice, every time you make a decision, from moment to moment. So you want to be able to see things moment to moment. That requires consistency. It requires patience. It requires that you really be observant. That’s what the Buddha called the Four Bases of Power. Concentration, based on desire. Concentration, based on persistence. Concentration, based on intent. Concentration, based on circumspection, using your powers of mind. The desire has to be there. You have to realize, “Okay, this is an important job we’re doing.” And even though it may seem enormous, you can take it apart. And you realize it’s something you’ve got to face. You can’t run away. Running away from it doesn’t solve the problem. It just hides it for a while. But it keeps coming back, coming back. Do you want to have to turn around and face the problems of your desires and your greed, anger, and delusion when you’re sick, when you’re dying, when you don’t have much energy to do with anything at all? Or would you rather do it now, when you’ve got the energy? Think about what it would be like to have some control over these things. It may not come easy, but once it comes, it’s really worthwhile. The pride of having accomplished something that takes time and energy really does make a difference in your life. That’s a very satisfying feeling. So try to base your concentration on that desire to deal with the big issues in life and not run away. Base your concentration on persistence, this ability to stick with things. Again, we tend to think of persistence just as gritting your teeth and bearing with it, but that’s not what it is. It requires seeing what needs to be done right now, right now, right now, sticking with it step by step by step, breaking it down, and learning how to encourage yourself along the way. Every job that takes time requires an ability to talk yourself into sticking with it, sticking with it, keeping yourself encouraged. So try to develop that mental habit. Instead of listening to the voice that says, “Ah, enough. I’m going to give up,” listen to the voice that says, “Hey, come on. You can do it. Just a little bit more, a little bit more.” And learn to find ways to make that energy entertaining. Start playing with the breath. You realize that’s just what you’re doing. You have something to play with. See what long breathing does for a while. See what short breathing does for a while. There are lots of different places to focus. See how your sense of your body changes simply by the way you breathe, or how the way you experience the breath changes by the way you imagine the breath. See what mental pictures you have. Try getting a whole-body awareness when it feels like you’re breathing in and out of the pores, and then maintain that no matter what you’re doing around other people, when you’re doing this job, when you’re doing that job. It changes the texture of your life. You’ve got these skills that nobody else has to know about. Develop concentration based on intent. What intent means here is that you give your whole attention to what you’re doing. Again, you don’t just go through the motions. You really try to be sensitive. You really try to be alert. Learn about the breath. There are a lot of cause-and-effect patterns going on here. When a mood comes up, where does it come from? Does the breath affect the mood? Does it bring it on sometimes? Because sometimes it’s not just the mood affecting the breath. Sometimes the breath brings on the mood. We’ll look for that and see how that happens. Finally, develop concentration based on ingenuity. If things aren’t going well, we’ll try to figure out new ways to make them go well. John Lee gives basic principles in his books, but that’s what they are. Sometimes he gives you some idea of how to play with them, and that should give you an idea that there are other ways to play with them as well. When the breath doesn’t seem to hold any interest, well, there are all these other topics that you can focus on as well. Contemplation of the body, mindfulness of death, goodwill meditation, starting with goodwill. There are lots of ways of dealing with the mind. The mind has lots of different tricks, and so you need lots of different tricks as well. Just because a particular approach isn’t listed in the texts, if it gives results, it’s part of the Dhamma. It’s part of the practice. When you’re sitting out under the trees, sitting and meditating, it’s not like you’re left to your own devices. It is something you have to do for yourself, but there are all these tools, all the Buddhist teachings, all the approaches for meditation, to help you deal with the big problem in life, the fact that the mind is creating suffering when it doesn’t have to, because it’s not skillful. Skill is not something innate in people. It’s something we develop, we work on. We don’t go from being totally unskilled to being totally skilled. It’s a gradual process. There are points where there are sudden changes, sudden insights that really make things different, but throughout the Buddhist teachings, he talks about how it’s a gradual process, step by step by step. Because those are the only kinds of skills you can really develop. You take things, break them apart into manageable jobs, day by day by day. And every now and then you hit pay dirt. The image they use is going out in the ocean. You go down and there’s a gradual slope down the continental slope, and all of a sudden you drop off the shelf. There are these drop-off moments, but they won’t happen unless you learn how to stick very patiently with the gradual slope. So pick up whatever tools you need to help with that gradual process, because there’s no other way around the problem. Otherwise, you just go through life creating unnecessary suffering. Again and again and again. You have to ask yourself, if you don’t do it now, when will you do it? When you get older? If you don’t do it, no one else can do it for you. Each person’s skill is something he or she has to develop through his or her own efforts. So you’ve got the opportunity now. You might as well make the best of it.

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