Adjusting Your Focus

August, 2002

When there’s a Dharma talk during the meditation, you don’t have to pay attention to it. Most of your attention should stay with the breath, maybe half of a percent of the Dharma talk. In other words, leave it in the background. It’s there to act as a fence or a wall. In case your mind wanders off the breath, you run into the talk, and the purpose of the talk is to direct you back to the breath. So don’t let the talk interfere. If it so happens that the talk touches on something you’re doing right now, or an issue you’re having with the breath right now, the words will come in on their own without you having to send your attention out or send your focus out on the words. So keep the focus with the breath. That’s the foundation of what we’re doing. Not so much the breath itself, but that awareness with the breath. It’s that steadiness of awareness that comes. Now you stay with the breath. That forms the basis for all the skills you’re going to develop as a meditator. So there has to be a common, what you might call, awareness tone that just keeps going all the time. For most of us, our awareness goes in phrases. It goes for a little while and then stops. Just like music, it has to have phrases, otherwise the player wouldn’t have any time to rest at all. But with the meditation, it’s not music. It’s awareness, which goes a lot deeper. Then you want to develop a really good foundation, a good basement. Keep your awareness as continuous, as gradual as possible. What this means is you have to find the right amount of pressure to put on the breath, the right amount of pressure to put on your focus. So on the one hand, it’s not too heavy, it’s not oppressive, but on the other hand, you can maintain a steady presence. It’s like steering a sailboat. When you first get into it, you’re not experienced, you put your hand on the rudder and automatically you tend to steer either not hard enough or too hard. It takes a while to get a sense of the rudder so that you can just keep your hand on the rudder and you have a sort of instinctive feel, a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right, so instinctive that you hardly even notice it. The same is with driving a car. It takes a while to get a sense of the wheel and how the steering wheel relates to the wheels up front. But when you develop that sense, then it becomes almost automatic without thinking. A little adjustment here, a little adjustment there. It keeps the car going straight. That’s the same with meditation. In the beginning, you either press down too hard or you don’t press down hard enough. It takes a while to get sort of in on the beam and what’s just right. But with practice over and over again, you get a sense of what’s just right. And it’s that intuitive sense that’s going to be helpful. This is why it’s important as a meditator that you learn to have lots of skills for applying to whatever the situation may be. In the beginning, it’s easier to have one skill or one technique that you’re told, “Well, just do this one thing and don’t think about it and don’t let yourself do anything else.” For a short period of time, you can subject your mind to that kind of approach. But it doesn’t develop any sense of finesse. It may give you a sense of accomplishment in the beginning because you don’t have to think too much. You don’t have to worry about being observant or not. But it doesn’t develop the kind of sensitivity that you really need in order to catch the mind. So, as you go through the body, you have to develop a sense of which areas of blockage in the body you can work through and which ones you can’t. It would be easier to say, “Well, just leave them all alone.” But that doesn’t help in developing any sensitivity. So even though it may be frustrating for a while to figure out, “Well, I don’t know yet. Trial and error. Trial and error.” After all, sometimes there seem to be more errors than successes in the trials. But remember, with meditation you’re in here for the long haul. It’s a lifelong process. It’s a skill. It’s a basic skill for survival of the mind. So give it some time. Be observant. Learn how to pick yourself up again if you fall down. It’s amazing how few people in the world really have that talent. They make a mistake and they get discouraged. They get flustered. But that doesn’t help stop making mistakes. And so they start getting into denial and all kinds of mental contortions. Or you just give up, none of which are really helpful attitudes in the meditation that are helpful attitudes. Okay, you fall down. Well, you’ve fallen down. It’s not like you’ve skinned your knee or anything. Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and continue with the breath. And remind yourself it is possible to fall every now and then. So you have to be prepared. Try to be quick to notice when the mind is beginning to get off the breath. Don’t wait until it’s already wandering around. Playing with the dog down at the lighthouse. As soon as it begins to move off the breath, it’s kind of like an inchworm going from one leaf to the other. The inchworm will have a few legs on the first leaf, but then it’s got these front legs out waving in the air, waiting for another leaf to come past. As soon as another leaf comes up, there it goes. Well, be sensitive to when your inchworm is in the waving stage, before it’s caught something else. Just bring it back to the original leaf. That way you find that the meditation is much less of a bumpy ride. It gets a lot smoother and smoother and smoother with time. What this comes down to are the two pieces of instruction that the jhanfa intended to stress over and over again. One, learn how to play with the breath. Learn how to play with your attention. Get a sense of what the variations are there. What kinds of different ways of breathing there are, and what kinds of different ways of focus there are. And have that sense of playing around. Not that you’re not really going to pay attention when you talk about playing around. It’s more like Michael Jordan playing basketball. Working at it, but enjoying it at the same time. Which comes with the other instruction, which is to be observant. Notice what you’re doing. Notice what the results are. Learn from your mistakes. Learn from things that you do right. When you have this kind of attitude, you find you develop all kinds of skills in the meditation. You learn which of the times to focus on the breath. If you’re having difficulty staying with the breath, there are other topics you can think about that’ll get you in the right mood to get back to the breath. You can think about the Buddha. When you get discouraged, you can think about death, when you get lazy. You can think about the body, as we chanted just now, the 32 parts, when there’s lust. You can think about goodwill, when there’s anger. There are a lot of antidotes for different states of the mind. And again, with each of these, you’ll start out with a few very basic instructions. But it’s in learning how to tailor those instructions to your specific issues right here, right now. That’s where the skill lies. That’s when they really start getting effective. So if you take this attitude of you’re here to learn a skill, and teaching yourself how to enjoy it, and developing your sensitivities in how to notice what you’re doing, what comes about as a result, that’s when the meditation really goes someplace. That’s when it really starts making a difference. Not just a difference for an hour or so, but a difference that really lasts through your life.

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