Battle Strategies

November, 2002

We meditate because there’s work to be done in the mind. One of the Pali terms for meditation, gamatthana, means “the work of the mind.” Why does the mind need work? Well, it needs training, because it has all kinds of skillful and unskillful qualities within it. And the problem is we often don’t know which is which. Or the right time for different skillful qualities. And even when we do develop a sense of which qualities in the mind are skillful and which ones are not, there’s the work of uprooting the unskillful ones, strengthening the skillful ones. And part of the work is giving the mind a place to rest. Nobody can work without resting. But if you just rest all the time, nothing gets done. We practice concentration. We try to get the mind still. But it’s not simply for the sake of keeping it still and not attending to the other duties. It’s having a place to rest. Once we know that place to rest, once we have gained strength from it, then we go and work. Dealing with the hindrances, dealing with the defilements in the mind, recognizing the fact that there are hindrances, there are defilements, and not simply putting up with them. I’ve noticed a lot of people came back from Asia with the impression that the goal of the teaching was lots of equanimity, lots of patience. I think that came about because as Westerners, when we went over there, we were very impatient and didn’t have much equanimity. So that was the first lesson that teachers had to teach us. For many, it was the primary lesson. That was about as much as they were able to get through our thick skulls. You’ve got to have equanimity. You’ve got to have patience. But there are times when equanimity and patience are not called for. As the Buddha said, there are certain things that you have to be very impatient about if you don’t tolerate them. In other words, you don’t allow unskillful qualities to take over the mind. He says you uproot them, you wipe them out of existence. The language there is pretty aggressive. You don’t just watch them coming and going in the big space of the mind and say, “Well, it’s okay that they’re coming and going, because when they go, they don’t leave a trace.” These things do leave traces. So we watch them coming and going. The purpose of realizing that they’re not us and aren’t ours is that we don’t have to identify with them. But then, once we realize we don’t have to identify with them, then we can get to work uprooting them. The unskillful qualities, the Buddha said, are basically two approaches. One is you focus on the object of that particular mind state. In other words, when anger arises, you look at what it is that you’re angry about to see if you can see something about it that would make you realize that it’s not worthy of your anger. It’s the same with lust. You look at the body that you’re attracted to to see some aspect in it that turns you off. But that in and of itself is not enough. You have to turn around and look at the mind state itself, because many times anger arises without there being any kind of external stimulus. It’s more the mind wants to be angry, and then it goes out looking for something to get angry about. The same with lust. If you like feeling lust, you’re going to want to find something that’s going to attract you, that’s going to make it flare up even more. So we have to turn around and look at these qualities as they flow out. The word here is asava. It seems like I’m flowing out of the mind, looking for trouble. And then when we find kindling, then we can really set on fire. So we have to look at both sides. As the Buddha said, there are things that act as food for our hindrances. And it’s because we don’t pay appropriate attention to them, we don’t look at them in the right way, that they can allow the hindrance to flare up. It’s sensual desire. It’s perception of beauty. Once we see something as beautiful, instead of just seeing it as a passing perception, we latch on to it. We start embroidering it. We want it. And so when something beautiful arises, as they say, look for its unbeautiful side as well. Look for its unattractive side. When you’re dealing with lust, it means looking at your body. Then look at the body of the other person that you’re attracted to. Take them both apart in your mind. This is why we have that chant of thirty-two parts of the body every day, every day. Because the sense of beauty is so ingrained in us that we’ve got to step back and realize the things that we’ve been taught to think are beautiful, the things that we teach ourselves to think are beautiful. They’re beautiful only when you look at certain parts of it. When people are taught to paint, composition is one of the first things they’re taught, how to arrange things on the canvas so they look nice. So we try to arrange things in our mind. Look at this from that angle. Look at that from that angle so it looks nice. We’ll try looking from the other angles. That’s called appropriate attention. Interpreting things, looking at things from the right angle so that whatever the hindrance is, it doesn’t have a chance to flare up. At least it can’t take hold of that particular item, that particular object as fuel. The same with anger. Irritation comes and we feed on it. We look at it in the wrong way. We look at it as an excuse to get angry. Whatever tendency we have to whine about, we want to get angry. Once it finds fuel like that, if we’re not careful, it will flare up. So the Buddha says you counteract that with thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. Goodwill is the first one. In other words, if you really felt goodwill for yourself, you wouldn’t let yourself get caught on fire by this. Then you can think of the other person that got you angry. Try to think of some aspect of that person that can excite your goodwill. Remind yourself that that person has good aspects, has a good side. Even for people who have no good sides, and all people who are totally evil, you have to feel compassion for them. They’re just digging themselves deeper and deeper and deeper into the ground. Sloth and torpor. The Buddha says when you pay inappropriate attention to your yawning, as soon as the slightest bit of boredom comes along, we latch on to it as an excuse to get lazy. “It’s not time to work now. I just don’t have the energy.” So you use the beginning of a dip in your energy to take you downhill. Just think about it. You could be sitting here getting really sleepy, getting really worn out in meditation, saying, “I just can’t handle this today. It’s time to go to sleep,” and all of a sudden say there was a fire broke out down in the lay house. We’d all be running around here when energy would come. We don’t know where it came from. So in some way you can excite that energy without having to set fire to the lay house, without having to have emergencies. It can be done. There’s what they call the potential for energy, the potential for effort. We do have these reserves of energy that we can tap if we want to. So you have to learn how to talk yourself into wanting to tap them. And so on down the line with each of the hindrances, there’s an object that you focus on in an inappropriate way and it excites the hindrance. There’s a little disturbance in the mind and you focus on it in an inappropriate way and it turns into restlessness and anxiety. Questions come into the mind about what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, and instead of really looking around to gain information or to watch carefully, you just let yourself get carried off in the uncertainty. So you learn how to look at these things from another angle. When there’s unstillness in the mind, there’s also stillness. There are moments of stillness. If the mind were totally agitated all the time, we’d go crazy. So the mind does have its little moments of stillness. You focus on those. And instead of getting upset about the lack of stillness in the mind, you focus on at least the little bits that you’re able to get still. And as you focus on those, you find that they get stronger and stronger and stronger. As for uncertainty, you focus on the qualities of your mind that you know are skillful and that you know are unskillful. You realize that not everything in life is uncertain. There are certain things that you know from experience. If you do this, you’re going to get in trouble. You’re not in trouble with other people. It’s going to cause trouble in terms of harm for yourself, harm for others. And then the things that you’ve done that you’ve realized did lead to peace. Did lead to well-being. Concentrate on those. And from that bit of certainty, the realm of certainty can grow. The areas that you’re certain about can grow. So it comes down to appropriate attention. Learning how to look at things around you, which things to focus on, which things to ignore, what angle to look at things from, so you don’t stir up hindrances. And as you’re learning how to separate the state of the mind from its object, then you can turn around and look at the state of mind itself. Ask yourself, “Is this something that I really want to indulge in, that I really want to foster, that I really want to strengthen in the mind?” When you can look more and more carefully at the state in and of itself, the unskillful states really do get more and more unattractive. Especially when you’ve been practicing concentration, you have something to compare them with. You don’t just focus on getting rid of the unskillful states. You have to bring skillful states in as well, strengthen these so you have something, an alternative place to go. And learn how to appreciate the times when the mind is still, when the mind is at peace, when it is concentrated. Keep reminding yourself that you have the choice. There are so many things that you could focus on. Why do you focus on the things that get the mind all worked up in negative states? Focus on the things that are more positive. The next level of difficulty comes when figuring out which skillful state is appropriate for which period of time, for which situation. There’s an interesting passage where the Buddha talks about the factors of waking. They’re all positive qualities. He says sometimes there’s the wrong time for that particular quality, particularly things like serenity, concentration, and equanimity. When the mind is sluggish, when you’re getting lazy, those aren’t the qualities you want to develop. Equanimity doesn’t function as the ideal mind state in all situations. Mindfulness is always desirable, the Buddha said, but the other ones have their time and place. It’s learning to keep watch of your mind. When the mind is sluggish, you’re going to develop qualities of analysis of qualities, persistence, a sense of a rapture in the meditation that energizes you, so you don’t get blasé and apathetic about things that you really should be doing something about. When the mind is too worked up, that’s when you develop qualities of serenity, concentration, and equanimity. It’s not enough just to get rid of the unskillful qualities. You have to figure out which skillful qualities are appropriate for which situation. All this requires that you be observant.

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