Consistency

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Jon Foon once said that his students he enjoyed teaching the most were the ones who knew nothing of the Dharma. They’d come out to the monastery, and he’d give them a meditation exercise, and then they’d take it back home, and they’d simply do what they’d been told, without anticipating. What should happen next? Then they’d come back and report what had happened. He said the development of their meditation was a lot more natural than that of people who had read a lot in the Dharma books beforehand and had a lot of preconceived notions about how it should go, and would either consciously or unconsciously try to squeeze the meditation in that direction. As a result, their meditation got squeezed all out of shape. So, when you sit down to meditate, it’s important that you drop all your anticipations. Simply be with the breath. And when something comfortable comes up, try to maintain it. See how long you can keep a good, comfortable sensation going. And you might ask, “Why?” And the answer is, “Don’t ask. Just keep the sensation going. You’ll learn from it eventually.” But the ability to stick with something, to maintain it, is an important part of the meditation. Ajahn Put, one of the famous teachers in Thailand, who was among the few people fortunate enough to study with Ajahn Sau, who was Ajahn Mun’s teacher, said that people would come and ask Ajahn Sau how to meditate, and he would teach them how to stay with the word bhutto. If they asked him, “What does bhutto mean?” he’d say, “Don’t ask.” If they’d say, “What’s going to happen when I meditate on the word?” he’d say, “Don’t ask that either. Just meditate on the word.” That’s all you have to do. And then when they started getting results, he would give them the next step, and then the next. So again, it’s a question of learning how not to put too much pressure on the meditation. Of course, learning how to avoid putting too little pressure on it as well. If it’s too little pressure, then you just go wandering around and nothing ever has a chance to develop. But when there’s a comfortable sensation that you’ve been able to discover through the breathing, see if you can maintain that sensation, maintain your gaze on that one spot, without squeezing it, but at the same time without letting it go. The steadiness of your gaze, the steadiness of your ability to stick with it, is going to be an important factor. If we want to see anything very clearly, we have to be very steady, very still. Think of scientific experiments. You can get very precise equipment, but if you put it on a table that wobbles, the results of the experiment are going to be useless. You’ve got to have a good, solid basis for the equipment in order to get worthwhile results. It’s the same with meditation. You’ve got to get the mind in good, solid, stable states. A part of the mind will complain, “How are we going to get progress here? Isn’t it boring?” Don’t listen to that part of the mind. That’s one of the parts of the mind that’s going to make things unstable. You simply stay with this breath, and then this breath, and then this breath. You don’t have to anticipate what the next breath is going to be like. You don’t have to worry about what the last breath was like. Just be with this one. That’s all you’ve got to do. Keep it simple. Then, as you keep it simple, natural insight has a chance to arise—the insights that come precisely from the right causes. We are working here with cause and effect, and it’s not the case that the Buddha left anything out of his instructions. Everything is there. Our problem is that we try to anticipate things too much. We try to analyze things too much. Even though you do have to use some amount of evaluation in order to make sure that the amount of pressure is just right, that the comfort level of the meditation is just right, that’s all the mental activity you have to engage in right now. Otherwise, you can just let everything else be. Put everything else aside. Right effort means simply this—sticking with something, allowing it to develop at a natural rate. We live in a society where we value quick results, but some things can’t be pushed. Particularly in the meditation, the mind has to learn how to settle in and be at home and at ease in a really stable, way-in-the-present moment. And that takes time. So the right combination of right effort and patience is simply this—learning how to develop stability. As I say, right effort involves giving rise to skillful states in the mind, and once those skillful states are there, learning how to maintain them. So even though it may seem boring, even though you may want to get on to the next step because, after all, you don’t have that many days to meditate here, if you’re thinking in those terms, just let them be. The meditation is a lifelong process, and you want to get the steps right. Give them the space to develop naturally. Otherwise, it’s like planting rice. You go out and you plant the rice, and the rice plants come up maybe two inches off the ground, and you’re in a hurry because you want them to be three or four feet. So you pull them up to make them three or four feet long. And, of course, they get pulled out of the ground, the roots break, and the plant’s dead because you pulled it too much. So the trick is to figure out what the causes are, learning how to nurture that state of the breath, that quality of the breath, learning how to nurture the state of mind that can just stick with it from one breath to the next to the next without skipping around. It’s like running your eyes along a line. Go out and look at a windowsill sometime, and just sit very still, and then with your gaze start from one side of the windowsill and just go across the line of the windowsill and try to keep the movement of your gaze as steady as possible. You’ll find that it’s more difficult than you might imagine. The mind tends to jump, it tends to anticipate. It’s a skill to keep the movement of your gaze steady. It’s the same kind of skill to keep your mental gaze steady as well. You’ll find that it can be perfected not by anticipating, but just simply being as present as possible for each moment. So the intensity of right effort is not so much in terms of pushing things, but it’s just being really steady from moment to moment to moment. It’s a different kind of effort from what we’re normally used to. But it’s the kind of effort that gives results. We often think that to get results out of the meditation, it requires getting the mind into strange or unusual states, but that’s not the case. You want it to get very steady, very solid. There was a cartoon in The New Yorker a while back, quite a long time back, in fact. It shows a man sitting and meditating in his living room. His wife is in another room talking with a friend. She says, “Henry used to be such an interesting neurotic before he started meditating.” The implication being that as he starts meditating, he starts getting dull. Sometimes there is that feeling in the mind that you’re doing dull things here. Just sticking with one sensation for long periods of time, how dull can you get? But when you look at it as an opportunity to develop a very fine balance of sensitivity in the mind, then it becomes a more interesting challenge. In the meantime, you find that you settle down. John Lee talks about the word sila, which we normally translate as virtue. He says it has many levels. There’s the external level, which deals with your words and your actions. But there’s also the internal level, which you want to develop as well. You can derive many meanings from the word sila. One is normalcy. It’s the normal way you are. You’re trying to bring the mind to a state of really solid normalcy, a state of equilibrium, a kind of balance you can maintain for long periods of time, not tipping to the past, not tipping to the future, just very solidly right here. You can also pun on the word sila. There’s also sila, which means rock. You want the kind of steadiness and stability and solidity of a rock as a quality of mind. But in the course of that steadiness, you begin to see things you didn’t see before. Those little places in the mind that we tend to skip over, the gaps here and there, there’s a lot of interesting things going on there. It’s like the periods of time between acts in a play. They have to close the curtain when they’re moving the scenery, because if you saw them moving the scenery around, it would destroy a lot of the illusion. So they close the curtains, and then when everything’s set, they open them up again. The mind is often like that. When it moves from one thought world to another world, it closes the curtains on itself. A few adjustments are made, then it opens them up again. We’re used to being aware of our own minds in this way. It’s like phrases in music. You play a continuum, then you rest for a second, then you start the next phrase, and then you rest again. But in the mind, during those periods of rest, when the curtains are closed, a lot of interesting things are going on in terms of the fabrication of the mind, the fabrication of states of mind. If you want to see them, you have to learn a steadiness of gaze that you didn’t have before. Those are the places where insight can arise. You suddenly catch yourself as the mind creates one of these states of becoming. Instead of getting carried away with the process, you watch the process, simply as the mind creates that as a process rather than being concerned with the product, what’s going to come out. And it’s only when you’re steady and immovable in your gaze that you can see these things, because what happens is the mind tends to deflect the gaze. So you’re suddenly someplace else, and then you come back to a whole new thought world. So you learn not to be deflected, not to be distracted. You learn not to be distracted by the normal deceits of the mind. You learn how to see through the curtains. It’s almost as if, if you keep your gaze steady enough, the curtains become invisible. And it’s in those moments when the mind would normally get distracted or deflected, but it doesn’t. That’s when real insight arises. And it comes from a very strong, very solid stability in the mind. That’s what we’re working on here. So consistency is a real virtue in the meditation. And it’s very much a moment-to-moment practice without anticipation. Just stay with this one activity. Develop a sense of sensitivity to when things are going right, when you’re pushing too much, when you’re not pushing enough. And you find that this very simple process of being stable, even though it’s not easy to begin with, after all, it does become easier, but it is simple. This cuts through a lot of the illusions that the mind creates to get in the way of its own awareness. So try to develop a sense of the importance of consistency, the ability to create a good state and then maintain it no matter what, and not let yourself get deflected into other areas, other things. That’s the kind of effort that brings rewards. As John Fuang used to say, “Persistence,” in Thai, kvambhiyin, “is a little thing, but you have to do it consistently.” In Thai, it works better because it’s a pun. In Thai, you say kvambhiyin, but in Nidnit, they don’t say bhinnit, where nid means both small and continually. And the little things don’t amount to much unless you do them continually, but they’re the ones that make all the difference. It’s when you do.

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