Ardency

July, 2003

One who is ardent with respect for concentration. One of the chants we chanted just now. This word “ardent” is important. A lot of us like to think that the meditation is simply a process of not doing. And there are stages in the meditation when that’s true, but there’s an awful lot of groundwork that has to be laid before you’re ready for that. The quality of ardency is important, that you really keep tabs on what’s happening, keep watching what’s happening, with respect for concentration. Sometimes it’s easy to see other things as important. You’ve got to think about this, you’ve got to talk about that, you’ve got to react to this person, react to that person. And your concentration gets trampled all over because you don’t have proper respect for it. At the same time, we’re trampling over the concentration of other people many times, by the way we talk, by the way we act. So you really have to be strict with yourself on this issue of having respect for concentration and being really ardent in maintaining that respect. John Swett made the point over and over and over again in his Dharma talks that when you come to the practice, you have to come with an attitude of respect. See the importance of the practice. See the importance of a concentrated mind so that you don’t treat it in a casual or desultory way. Get a little bit of concentration and throw it away. That’s the way most of us practice. We work so hard to put it together. And then we stamp on it. It’s like little kids. Little kids making sandcastles. They work hard at building up the sandcastle, sometimes for whole hours. And then when the time comes to stop, they just trample all over it, play Godzilla with their castle. So don’t play Godzilla with your concentration. Do what you can to maintain it. Even as you get up from the meditation, go back to your other meditation spot. In the course of the day, when you’re eating, when you’re doing the cleaning up work, try to maintain this inner center. And it takes work, because the mind is so prone to go off and thinking about other things. All the issues that we have surrounding the way we deal with other people, those tend to get in the way. Or the things that we think we have to think about, or the issues that we like to feed on. These all get in the way of the concentration. And if you have more respect for them than for the concentration, it’s no contest. The concentration will get trampled on. So keep this at the center of your awareness. Keep this in your thoughts at all times, that you want to be with the breath. To whatever extent you can maintain that sense of center in the course of the day. That’s your main responsibility. Other responsibilities come in addition to that, subservient to that. In other words, the work that has to be done around the monastery is a good chance to practice concentration in different situations. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that the work gets done. Somebody’s got to do it. But the same time, it’s an important practice. Don’t think that you’re doing it for somebody else. You’re doing it for the sake of training the mind. Learning to keep this inner center as you’re pulling the weeds, as you’re washing the dishes, whatever needs to be done as you’re sweeping up. It’s like that old trick of learning how to walk and chew gum at the same time. In this case, we’re learning how to walk and stay with the breath at the same time. Pull weeds and stay with the breath at the same time. Wash dishes and stay with the breath. Talk with other people and stay with the breath. It may seem that staying with the breath may get in the way of what you want to say. But you might ask yourself, “Is that really a loss? How much of what we say in the course of the day really is helpful, really is necessary, really does show respect for other people’s concentration?” If you’re coming from a spot of concentration, then what you have to say will not change the jar of the other person’s concentration, or at least not pull it off in a way that’s contrary to the Dharma. In this way, you’re showing respect both for your own concentration and for theirs. It requires effort. Remember that effort is part of the path. The effort to give rise to skillful states, the effort to maintain them once they’ve arisen, this is right effort. The effort to let go of unskillful states that have arisen and to prevent unskillful states that haven’t yet arisen from coming into being. It’s all part of right effort. You want to bring this quality of ardency to it. In other words, when you see that you have slipped off, bring yourself right back to the breath. Try to cut down the steps that are required for doing that. For a lot of us, the requirement seems to be that there’s a lot of recrimination in between the time of noticing that you’ve slipped off and coming back to the breath. That’s not helpful at all. Remind yourself that that’s not keeping you with the breath; it’s actually getting in the way of the breath. So put it aside. Try to get quicker and quicker at coming in right at the right spot where it feels good to be in the breath. Because so many times when we pull the mind back to the breath, there’s a period of reverberation because we pulled it too strongly, forced it down too much, or haven’t forced it enough. So with practice, try to get a sense of just the right amount of pressure that has to be applied to bring the mind back to the breath. Then ardency turns into trying to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. Many times the reason we lose the breath is because we’re not really sensitive to it. The meditation starts becoming mechanical. It starts getting put on automatic pilot, and the next thing you know you’re off someplace else. But if you really are ardent in trying to be sensitive to even the most refined discomfort in the breath so that you can smooth it out, clear it away, wash it away, then you find that the mind gets more and more interested in the present moment. When there’s an element of interest, it’s easier to stay. There’s a lot to observe here, a lot to figure out. Sometimes we think of concentration practice as simply forcing the mind to be in the present. That doesn’t last long. You start exploring the relationship between the mind and the breath, the relationship between the rhythm of the breath and the sense of ease or dis-ease that comes from the way you breathe. Different ways of conceiving how the breath comes in and out of the body. We know that the air that goes along with the breathing comes in and out the nose, but what about the energy patterns in the body? Where do they come in? Where do they go? How do they start? How do they stop? How do you know when it’s the right time to switch from an in-breath to an out-breath, or from an out-breath back to an in-breath? What are the signs? If you pay careful attention, you’ll start seeing there’s a lot going on in here. The more you get interested in what’s going on and how it can be adjusted so that it feels better and better, more and more solid and secure, you find it easier and easier to stay with the breath. It all comes from this quality of ardency, coupled with respect for concentration. This, as the passage we chanted just now said, puts us in the presence of nirvana. Showing respect for other things are old patterns of thought that just keep us going in the same old ways, the same old ruts, we’ve been going through for who knows how long. What we want is the kind of respect that puts us in the spot where things can begin to open up in new directions. That’s the passage in the canon that says to start seeing things we’ve never seen before, realizing things we’ve never realized before, attaining what has not yet been attained. So meditation is not simply a process of stopping doing things or returning to an ordinary mind. Effort is involved in the loop. The issue is learning how to make it right effort. So it’s not simply effort that’s applied in the wrong direction. If you apply it in the wrong direction, after a while you just start getting tired and you don’t see any results coming, that tends to put you in a bad mood towards the meditation as a whole. Learn what’s meant by right effort, the kind of effort that you can maintain for hours on end, days on end. It brings you into the presence of awakening. That’s a special kind of effort. It includes the desire, the willingness to master the skill, persistence, intentness, really being careful, being very sensitive, and then the ingenuity you need in order to figure out your ways around problems. These are all qualities that are involved in right effort. So something has to be learned through trial and error, coming back again and again to figure out what you’ve been doing wrong. So you can start doing it right, and then it feels more and more natural when you’re doing it right. So it is a level of effort that can be maintained continually. Learn how to enjoy the meditation as you’re doing it. Learn how to take interest in what’s going on in the present moment. How is the mind disguising its inner currents from itself? There’s a lot to be found out here. Once you can develop that quality of interest, then the meditation starts going better. The interest is part of respect. The Pali word for respect means that you give weight to something, in other words, you see that it’s important. When something is important, you’ve got to pay attention to it. Just try to keep that level of attention as refined and as perceptive as possible.

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