Working at Meditation

July, 2003

The good state of concentration in the mind is often compared to having a home for the mind and providing the mind with food and nourishment. But as anyone who’s tried to build a home, tried to find food for nourishment, you realize it takes work. We like to think of concentration simply as a place to rest for the mind, but it does require work. To have that resting place. As for the nourishment, that requires work, too. The work here is basically mindfulness and alertness. And as they grow and develop, they turn into the two active factors of concentration, directed thought and evaluation. In other words, mindfulness is keeping a topic in mind, remembering not to slip away from the breath. Keeping a particular perception of the breath in mind. You can think of the breath coming in and out of any part of the body. At the same time, keeping the perception in mind that you want the breath to be as good for the body as possible. Now, “good” here can mean relaxing, but it can also mean energizing, depending on what the body needs. We’re not here just to rest. If we were here just to rest, we’d hand out pillows and sleeping mats. We wouldn’t have to sit here with all the pain of sitting in one position. The purpose of getting the mind to settle down is, on the one hand, to get it to rest, but at the same time it’s also to get the mind and body aligned together. That’s where the food comes in, because as the mind and body get aligned, they give strength to each other. So remembering, that’s why we’re here, to stay with the breath. Stay with the body. Bring the mind and the body together. Alertness is when you’re actually watching what’s going on. So you’re going to check to see, “Is the breath really comfortable? Is it really coming in? Is it really going out? Where is it coming in? Where is it going out? Is there anything uncomfortable about the process of breathing?” You start in one spot and make a little clearing right there. It might be at the center of the chest. It might be at the nose. It might be around the abdomen. Any spot where it’s easy to get started. And then you spread out from there. You might start from the navel and go up the body, or you might start from the back of the neck and go down the back. Whatever way feels convenient, as long as you’re systematic about covering the whole body, section by section. This is the work you have to do in order to build that house, the work you need to do in order to find that food and prepare it. There’s a fair amount of thinking involved, but that’s one of the factors of evaluation, or one of the aspects of evaluation. You’ve got to evaluate what you’ve got here before you can really settle down and be solid. It’s this active part of the meditation that helps keep you from drifting off and falling asleep, or just going into a sort of delusional state in the meditation. All too often it’s easy when your range of awareness is small and the breath starts getting comfortable. Things begin to blur out. Mindfulness starts to grow very weak. In order to keep mindfulness strong, you’ve got to exercise it. Move it around. Make up your mind you’re going to stay with this part of the body. Remind yourself to stay there. Then remember to go to the next part, and then the next part. Remember what your system is for going through the body. It’s the functions of mindfulness. As mindfulness grows, it turns into what’s called directed thought. The Pali is vittaka. It means your thought is very solidly directed in a particular direction. You don’t lose your train of thought. It doesn’t go running off the track. It stays right where you want it to. It has a definite purpose, to stay with the body. The breath, to stay with the sensation of the breathing so you can work on it. Be alert to what’s going on, where it’s comfortable, where it’s not, what you might do to make it more comfortable. Again, “comfortable” here doesn’t necessarily mean “relaxed.” Sometimes it means “energizing.” You work through the body. As you work through the body, even though it does require effort, the energy that is expended is more than compensated for by the sense of energy that arises. It’s like eating. It takes energy to find food, to fix food, to eat food. But the body gets a lot more energy from the food than the energy that’s expended in the eating. In the beginning of the meditation, it may not seem that way because our techniques for finding and fixing the food are still pretty crude. But as you get more and more refined, the quality of the energy that you get goes higher and higher. So the quality of the meditation, the quality of this house that we’re building for ourselves, the quality of the food, depends on the quality of the work that we’re doing. Directing our thought to the breath and then evaluating the breath, being as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels. This is where discernment grows. Discernment is not simply a matter of seeing things the way the texts tell us to see them. It means being more and more sensitive to the way things actually are in the present moment. You begin to see cause and effect as they’re actually happening. When you breathe in a certain way, it has an immediate impact on the body, an immediate impact on the mind. To be sensitive to that is to develop the faculty that you’re going to need to develop the discernment that eventually leads to true freedom. When the Buddha talks about the qualities that lead up to discernment and strengthen discernment, he doesn’t start with reading. He starts with conviction. Conviction and what you do gives results. A lot of people have problems with the teaching on karma. But that’s basically what it comes down to, is that your actions do have an impact on your life. Aren’t you glad they do? If they didn’t have an impact, what would you do? You’d be totally helpless. The question simply is learning how to be careful about your actions so that they have the best impact. They give you the results that you want. This is where discernment is useful, learning how to be more and more sensitive to what you’re doing, what the results are, so that you can refine your actions. You start out with generosity and you learn how to be better and better at being generous. That doesn’t necessarily mean giving more and more, but it means giving more wisely with more discernment. The same with the precepts. Precepts require discernment in order for you to maintain them. They require a sense of conviction that what you do really does have an impact on your life, so you better be careful about what you do. Then, as your sensitivity gets greater and greater to your actions, you begin to see more and more how the words you say, the things you do, really do have an impact. You don’t have to wait until the next lifetime. You can see it happening right here and now, and all the more as you’re meditating. You change the breath, you change the focus, it’s going to have an immediate impact on the sense of well-being in the body, that sense of rest, that sense of nourishment that comes when the meditation is going well. As your powers of discernment get more refined, your sensitivity gets more refined, the sense of well-being seeps deeper and deeper into the body and nourishes parts of your body, nourishes parts of your mind that have been starving for a long time. That’s for a second. There are sections of the body where things tend to be tight and constricted. After a while, with a lot of good breath energy around them, they begin to loosen up as well. As they loosen up, the nourishment of your mindfulness, the nourishment that’s provided by your powers of evaluation, that begins to seep into that part of the body as well. Although we often like to think of meditation simply as a resting spot for the mind, it requires work. Again, think of it in the same way. It’s the work that goes into building a house, the work that goes into fixing food, the energy, the possibility of gaining rest more than make-up from the amount of energy that’s expended. The work that’s expended in building the house, building the home, foraging for the food, fixing for the food, sitting down and having to chew the food. The energy gets more than repaid. But if you just decide that you’re simply going to rest and not do the work, it’s like sitting down next to a pile of materials you have for the house and just falling asleep. Maybe you can sleep on the boards and pull the roofing over you, but that’s not a very comfortable way to sleep. The same with food. There’s food there, but you simply lie down on it, hoping that your skin is going to absorb the food. It doesn’t work that way. You’ve got to work at these things. You’ve got to put that house together. You’ve got to fix the food so the body can digest it properly. But then when you get the results of your work, you realize that it’s more than makes up for the energy, for the effort that’s expended. When the time comes that you really can put aside that work of direct thought and evaluation and just stay with the really solid, well-nourished sense of the energy in the body, energizing both the mind and the body, because they’re aligned together. They’re helping each other. You get there because you’ve been willing to do the work. But don’t think of the work as onerous work, as heavy work. It’s refreshing work. After all, that’s one of the translations for the word that we often talk about as “rapture.” It’s a sense of refreshment that comes from the body. This is what gives you the nourishment, gives you the sense of well-being and refreshment that makes the meditation pleasurable. When it’s pleasurable, it’s easy to stick with it. The mind, at the same time, because it has gained rest and has been nourished, is more and more willing to listen to the lessons that discernment is going to point out. If the mind feels hungry and tired, it doesn’t want to listen to anybody, not even to its own discernment, its own wiser voices inside. It just wants what it wants right now and doesn’t care about how you get it. It doesn’t want to be bothered. That’s not the kind of mind that’s going to open up to discernment, no matter how much it reads about the Buddhist teachings. You’ve got to get the mind in a good mood, well-nourished, well-rested, with a sense of being secure. In that sense of security, where it’s not threatened by anything, then it’s willing to open up and look at itself. You see this outside. When people feel threatened, they don’t want to look at their own problems or their own contribution to why that threat was there. All they want to do is have a sense of security, a sense of protection. But once they feel secure, then they’re more willing to open up and see what they’re doing wrong, so that security gets greater. We’re talking about a genuine security here, not the kind of false thing that comes from laying all the blame on things outside or developing a sense of guilt for laying blame on things inside. It means working directly with what you’ve got right here, so you see what’s going on. It becomes a very realistic sense of what you’re doing right, what you’re doing wrong, and you’re willing to learn. That’s where real security comes from, actually. It’s that openness to learn, that openness to learn new things about yourself, what you’ve been doing that’s been wrong, what you can do to make it better. That’s where your sense of security provides security, not only for yourself, but also for the people around you. As the mind gets more secure, it’s less likely to give in to greed, anger, and delusion. It’s got that inner sense of nourishment, so it doesn’t have to go feeding outside. It’s got that inner sense of rest, so it doesn’t have to go out leaning on other people. You find more and more that you’ve got all you need for the care and feeding of the mind right here. If you pay enough attention to the breath, pay enough attention to the mind as it’s watching the breath, then all the lessons you need to learn are right here.

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