Rebel Without a Cause

August, 2003

Meditation can sometimes be a humbling experience when we see how little control we have over our own minds. We sit here making up our mind. We’re going to stay with the breath for the whole hour, and sometimes it doesn’t even last five minutes. You’re off someplace else, and you come back, and then you go off again. It just goes to show how much goes on in the mind that’s not part of your conscious choice. There are a lot of subconscious choices being made, and then there are lots of things coming in from the past. Past actions, past habits, memories buried down in the mind. As soon as the surface of the water begins to grow still, a lot of things from the depths come bubbling up. So it’s important to learn how to have equanimity towards the whole process, especially what’s coming from the past. There’s not much you can do about past actions, past habits, because they’re done. When things like that come bubbling into the mind, you just learn how to sit them out. All these different movies that are playing in the mind. One trick, though, is to learn how to not get involved in those movies. Even if they’re going on in the mind, you stay with the breath. You stay with the meditation word bhutto. If the breath is too subtle, use bhutto together with it. Think of every cell in your body saying bhutto, bhutto, along with the breath. Or just separate from the breath a lot faster to block things out. That can be your present intention, and see how long you can stick with that. As for whether the movies are going to come or not, that’s part of your past karma. That you have to accept with equanimity. It’s like getting on an airplane and not knowing whether or not they’re going to show a movie or which movie they’re going to show. You don’t have any choice. But you do have the choice whether you’re going to focus on the screen or not, whether you’re going to plug in the earphones or not. That much choice you do have in the present moment. So focus on that. One of the whole points of the meditation is learning to focus your attention on where you can control, where you can make a difference. Learn to appreciate the importance of your present intentions. This is why the Buddha’s very last words to the monks were to be heedful. It was a directive that was an imperative. Be heedful. Teaching them to take a certain attitude toward their actions, realizing that their actions are important. What you do is important. It’s what shapes your experience and also has an impact on the people around you. So learn to focus on the areas where you really can make a difference. This is what equanimity is for. It’s not for simply being blasé or abstract. It goes together with wisdom, sorting out which areas you can change and which areas you can’t, which actions are worthwhile and which ones are not. If it’s an area where you can’t make a difference, that’s where you develop equanimity. So you can focus your energy on the areas where you can make a difference. And a lot of the wisdom lies in knowing where you can make a difference. which is which. This is why in the Seven Factors of Awakening, the factor that’s called “analysis of qualities,” the analysis of qualities of the mind, that comes before equanimity. In other words, you learn to see which impulses are useful, which ones are not, which ones are skillful, which ones are not, which ones actually get results, which ones get better, which ones get bad results, which ones get no results at all, aside from wasting your energy, which comes down to a unskillful quality as well. Once you sort them out, then that’s where you develop the equanimity, towards the areas that you can’t change. So you can husband your strength, husband your energy. Focus on areas where you can. In this case, equanimity follows on wisdom, follows on discernment. It’s meant to be developed in that context of understanding that the actions of your mind really do have an impact. So you want to do your best to make that the best impact possible. So as we’re sitting here working on the breath, if things come up that you have no control over, leave them to oneself. Let them be in the back corner of your mind. Just do your best to make sure they don’t overwhelm the mind, take over the mind. Let there be at least some measure of mindfulness that’s separate from them. And hang on to that measure of mindfulness, because that plants the seed. It helps you realize that no matter what comes up, you do have the choice to jump into it or not. As you get to know the mind better, you begin to see there’s a particular moment. A thought begins to form. You stamp a meaning on the form, and then you decide whether to go into it or not. It’s a choice. Many times it’s subconscious, but as the mind gets more still, it’s like lowering the water level. Things that used to be underwater suddenly are left high and dry, and you begin to see clearly what they are. You see these choices as they’re being made, and you realize that it is a choice. Because it’s conscious, then you have the opportunity to choose one way or the other, whether to go with the thought or not. But until you reach that point, learn to have some equanimity toward whatever comes up in the mind, these things that pop up in the mind. If you can get rid of them, fine. If you can’t, leave them in the back corner. Let them chatter away to themselves, as long as you realize that you have the choice not to get involved. Emphasize that choice. Then you begin to see that there are parts of the mind that really do want to go and get involved in that conversation. Ask them, “Why? What are you getting out of this? What satisfaction comes from those old thoughts?” Whether it’s greed, lust, anger, delusion, fear, the mind engages in these things because it finds some measure of satisfaction. But learn to ferret that out. If you don’t see what the satisfaction is, you’ll never understand it. As the Buddha said, an important part of understanding anything is finding the gratification that comes from it. Compare that with the drawbacks, seeing how they balance off, what’s the payoff, and is the payoff worth the price. If you deny that there’s any gratification, you’ll never be able to compare it. It’ll go underground. But if you admit to yourself, “Yes, there is this measure of gratification, but look at it, see how much it is, and then think of the drawbacks that come from trying to feed on that gratification all the time.” It may take time, but after a while you get tired of it. You begin to see that the mind keeps going back to the same old places to feed again and again and again. It doesn’t really get much. It’s like a dog going back to gnawing all over the same old bone. As John Lee says, “The only taste on the bone now is its own saliva.” Watch that in as much fairness as possible. You find after a while you really do get tired of it, and it gets harder and harder to go for those things, easier and easier to put them aside. So it’s important to realize that in the Buddha’s analysis of understanding something, it’s not just trying to look at things in terms of their drawbacks. Understand the gratification, because if you don’t understand the gratification, you’ll never understand why they keep coming back. Just try to be very clear and see what miserable kind of gratification most of those old thoughts provide. If you can watch this process in perfect equanimity, perfect fairness, you’ll find that bit by bit by bit those thoughts hold less and less allure, less and less attraction. And this is what we refer to them as, not by repressing them or denying their existence, but really looking at them, giving a little space to watch, see what they have to offer. Because when they’re underground, they seem to offer an awful lot. It’s like any object that’s underwater. It appears bigger than it is. When you bring it up, get its true proportions, and then the refraction that the water gives, you can see it for what it actually is. The appeal seems a lot less. The drawbacks become more and more obvious. It’s in this way that our concentration practice depends on discernment. We hear so many times that you have to develop concentration and then you get the discernment. But there has to be some insight for the mind to settle down to begin with. If you don’t see the drawbacks, see the allure of the things that you’ve been spending all your time with, it’s hard to understand how to bring the mind down to stillness. There are cases when you can simply make up your mind to keep the mind still and at a base. There are other times, though, when it doesn’t. When it doesn’t, you have to use your understanding, use your discernment, use your wits to outwit these thoughts. The part of the mind that feels it really needs to feed on these thoughts. It’s old addiction to these thoughts. Then learn how to imagine yourself not falling for them. A lot of the problem is that you don’t realize that this is simply the way the mind is, the way it always has been, and the way it’s always going to be. But it doesn’t have to be that way. If you can imagine a different way of organizing things, a different way of running the mind, the simple fact of being able to imagine it makes it a lot more possible that it actually can happen. So watch and compare the gratification that comes from these distracting thoughts and the drawbacks of these distracting thoughts. If you were to follow through with them, where would it take you? If you’re not going to follow through with them, why think them? Why waste your energy? Keep that little insistent question in your mind every time you find the mind veering off into distraction. What are you getting out of this? What are the results going to be of following this course of action? A lot of times the mind will be rebellious and say, “To hell with you. I’m going to think this because I want to.” But if you keep asking that question steadily enough, after a while the mind, the question starts having more force. And the rebelliousness seems less a sign of freedom than a sign of real stupidity. And when you can see that, then it’s a lot easier to let go of those distractions. At the same time, you try to provide as comfortable a spot as you can with the breath so that the alternative to thinking those thoughts is not total deprivation. You’ve got a good spot for the mind to stay. The mind is like a runaway kid many times. You’ve got a good home for it. The kid is just being rebellious. But after a while it sees that its rebellion leads nowhere. And as long as it realizes there’s always that good place to go back to, the time will come when it really does want to go back. Not because you force it, but because you see clearly that it is a much better place. And it’s not just an intellectual decision that it’s a better place. You feel it deep down in your bones.

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