Rhythms of the Practice

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Practice has its rhythms. There are times when you’re really gung-ho, and there are times when you’re less enthusiastic about it. The trick is how to work within those rhythms so that the defilement underlying the rhythm doesn’t take over. Especially the one when you’re less than enthusiastic about the practice. There’s a trick to figure out what needs to be done in order to loosen up a bit, but without at the same time just abandoning the practice. You’ve got to stick with it. So you do it together with other things. We talked the other day about when it just gets really dry and unpleasant, get up and walk around for a while. Find a little chore to do and work on that, but still keep the breath in the back of your mind. Don’t totally abandon it, because, after all, it’s there. And you don’t want to give in to the defilement that says, “I don’t want to work on this. I want to do something else.” So you give yourself something else to do, but you keep the breath there. It may not be the clearest or most vivid way to do it, but it’s a good way of focusing on the breath. All that’s really required is that you have a sense of the breath energy in the body. Does it feel good? Does it feel healthy? If it doesn’t feel good, you can work with it. Remember, the breath has many levels. There’s the in-and-out breath. There’s the energy field surrounding the body. There’s the flow of breath energy that goes through the blood vessels along the nerves as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So you can work with any of those levels that seem appropriate. Even while you’re working on other things, the energy field in your body is right there. If you sense any tension or tightness or blockage, just let it go, let it go, let it go. Many times you’ll find interesting things come up in your mind. Things you notice about the way the mind reacts to an object or approaches an object. Just little glimpses of the mechanics of the mind catch the corner of your eye. Many times it’s outside of formal periods of sitting and walking meditations that you actually see these things. So you want to have the breath in the background all the time. If that feels oppressive, ask yourself exactly where is the breath oppressive? There may still be something wrong with the way you’re breathing. So it gives you something to work right there with the breath as you’re puttering around, weeding, washing, whatever the extra chore you’ve given yourself. Or you’re walking up the mountain. You’ve got the breath there in the back of the mind. If it doesn’t feel right, you can play with it and have that attitude of play. This makes it a lot easier to work with the breath. If you feel that it’s a chore or some sort of ironclad requirement placed over you, the mind’s going to rebel. So learn how to play with the breath. Learn how to find some enjoyment in the way you can play with the breath energy in the different parts of the body. This also helps when you finally get back to your formal meditation. The mind hasn’t been wandering off very far. It’s right there. It’s like you’ve been keeping it on a short leash. The time comes to say “sit” and it sits. It’s not like a dog left on a long leash whose leash gets entangled in all kinds of things. It’s left on a long leash. You come back and you have to unwind this tree and you have to unwind that whatever. The dog has been walking around. Sometimes the whole hour is spent unwinding the leash so you can finally get the dog back to the breath. But if you kept it on a short leash, it’s right there. So make this your minimum stance. No matter what’s happening, you’ve got the breath there in the background. You tune into it as much as you can, as you’re doing other things, so that the meditation becomes an integral part of your life. It’s not one more added burden placed on top of the other burdens and responsibilities you have throughout the day. It actually lightens your burden, because if you’re carrying tension around in your body, whatever you’re going to do is going to be burdensome. Here you are working on releasing the tension, opening up blockages. So what’s onerous about that? There are other rhythms in the practice as well. There are times when you want to read up on the practice. Other times, the last thing you want to look at is a book. Those are rhythms you can go with, because there are times when you really have the opportunity to explore things in the breath. You’re learning new things, and the books don’t seem quite right. You’re more eager to see what you can discover right here, right now, on your own. Then you find there comes a point where you’ve pretty much discovered what you can at that level. Or with your level of understanding, when you want to read up some more, get some new ideas. But the important thing about choosing what to read is material that really is directly related to the practice. Sometimes a very abstract dharma is fun to read, but it’s not really relevant to what you’re doing right now. Sometimes you get more tied up in what you’re reading, in the words and in the abstractions. That’s when you’re going to put the books down. If you need to read, find something else to read that’s more directly practice-related. But don’t reach the point that the mind just doesn’t want to read at all. All it wants to do is focus on the breath. Okay, put down the books. You don’t have to worry about them. After all, where did the Buddha discover the dharma? Right at his breath. He didn’t have any textbooks. He didn’t have any textbooks to follow. They talk about three kinds of discernment. The discernment that comes from listening, which includes the discernment that comes from reading. The discernment that comes from thinking, when you take what you’ve read and you reason through it. The discernment that’s really going to make a difference in your life is the discernment that comes from developing. As you develop mindfulness, as you develop concentration, you learn things about mindfulness and concentration that you wouldn’t have understood. Simply by reading about them. Because this is where the reality is, and the challenge is when mindfulness doesn’t want to settle down. Don’t give in to that tendency too easily. Find what the problem is. Work around it. Use your ingenuity. When you find an approach that works, you’ve learned something new about the dharma. The approach may work again the second time, the next time you meditate, or it may not. But file away in the back of your mind anyhow, because the time may come again when it becomes a useful approach. What’s really important is that attitude of trying to use your ingenuity, not giving in too easily. Because that’s when you learn about the ins and outs of your defilements, the ins and outs of your skillful qualities as well. So learning to read the rhythms of the mind is an important skill. We read books on meditation. Everything seems to progress in a nice, linear manner, step by step by step, and there you are. But the path of each individual is unique, because there’s a lot of territory that has to be covered. If you’re simply a straight line from where you are to Nirvana, it would be an easy path to follow. But it’s more like wandering around a large territory, until you finally find the spots that will open up. Many times you have to wander around the territory many, many times. So if you were to draw a map of your wanderings, it would all be a huge squiggle. But that doesn’t mean that you’re not doing the work, if you learn how to read the rhythms of the mind properly. Because part of the time it’s totally new territory, and other times it’s territory you’ve been over before, but you didn’t really notice it carefully enough. So you’ve got to go over it again. The fact that you have to back up is not a sign of regression. It’s simply a sign that you didn’t learn the lesson properly the first time. So you back up again and learn it more carefully this time. You keep going around and around and around on this one area, trying to stay with the breath, trying to understand the process. The mind in the present moment, the body in the present moment. If you limit your wanderings here, even though it’s a fairly complex territory, the time will have to come when you finally see. So don’t put too much thought into how long you’ve been meditating or what the results are. Focus on the present moment, where the mind is right now, and what needs to be done with it. John Lee gives the example of raising a child. Sometimes you have to take the child out for a walk, other times you give it milk, other times you swing it in your arms. Sometimes you have to take it to the doctor. It’s learning to read the symptoms of whatever’s wrong with the child, figuring out what needs to be done. In the beginning it’s hard, but as you get more and more familiar with it, then you realize, okay, now’s the time for food, now’s the time for a walk, get some fresh air. Whatever’s needed, that’s what you provide for the mind. Don’t worry about whether you can draw a line of your progress. Simply realize that the mind goes through many different stages, and you have to catch it at this particular stage, so you work with it where it is. And if what it needs seems to be a very simple meditation method, well, fine. Don’t underestimate the simple things. Don’t underestimate the basic things. A lot of the most important instructions in meditation are the very beginning ones. So you go over and over and over again, so you really master them. Whatever the mind needs, you provide it. That sense of bringing it back to balance. Ultimately there comes a point where the whole path comes together. Every element in the path is balanced together. Every element is connected with all the other ones. So it may take time to get all eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path working together, but as long as you’re working towards that element of balance, then you’ll be able You’re on the right track.

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