Slave to the Defilements, A

May 22, 2004

It’s important as you meditate that you give a lot of attention to giving the mind a good, comfortable place to stay, a place where it feels at ease, a place where it feels solid and secure. Sometimes I say when good states happen in the meditation, don’t get attached to them. Not to notice where they are. Try to remember where they are, so the next time you sit down, see if you can get yourself back to that spot. Again, don’t be frustrated if you can’t get there right away. This is a process that takes time. You’re getting to know the mind, which is a complex phenomenon. So try to approach your goals in a mature way. You do want the mind to have a good, solid place to stay. A comfortable place to stay, a place where it feels at ease, where it feels at home. Why is that? Because the work you’ve got to do is major work, changing the whole orientation of your mind. To do that well, you have to feel at ease. You have to feel secure in what you’re doing. Otherwise, it gets disorienting. You feel threatened. We see this in the way a lot of people approach meditation. They come to major crisis points in their meditation, and if they don’t have a good, solid place to stay, they go retreating to old ways of thinking, old ways of acting. They don’t allow themselves to be pushed over the threshold into something new. Or if they do push themselves over, with a sense of dis-ease, they can really get seriously disoriented. So what you want is a place where the mind can move into a new way of thinking, a new way of acting, with a sense of solidity. Because what are you doing? You’re looking at your old habits—passion, aversion, and delusion. These are the normal ways of the mind, and we’re trying to lift the mind up out of these things. So instead of their being in charge, the mind is in charge. So we’re no longer slaves to our desires. We can be in control of our desires. We’re no longer slaves to whatever comes into the mind, whatever happens to the body. As long as the mind is a slave to the body, it’s really in bad shape. Because what happens to the body? It gets old, it gets ill, and it dies. And it’s miserable. You see someone going through the process of dying slowly, and it’s one indignity after another. Things get more and more difficult. You get to the point where you can’t even say anything. You want to say things, but either your mouth can’t form the words, or nobody else can understand you. Things come closing in on all sides. As long as the mind is a slave to the body, it’s really in bad shape. If you’re a slave to your passion, aversion, and delusion, again, you’re in bad shape, because you don’t know where these things are going to pull you the next time around. First they pull you in one direction, then they pull you in another direction. No matter how much we try to dress these things up, they’re really harsh masters, because they make us do within a few seconds something that will destroy things that we’ve been working on for years and years and years. Things that have given meaning to our lives, suddenly we trash. And then what are you left with? You’re left with all the pieces. As for the passion or aversion or delusion that caused you to act in that way, that’s gone. It’s like someone who comes in and incites you to do something against the law. As soon as you’ve done it, they run away, and you’re left being held responsible. You’re the one who goes to jail. As for the passion, aversion, and delusion, they run free. So you have to see the seriousness of the situation in which the mind finds itself and realize that this requires careful work. You can’t deny their existence. You can’t push them away. You have to work at them in a skillful way, a well-considered way. This is why the Buddha has you develop good, strong states of concentration. So you can see things clearly, look at what’s happening, because we overcome these things not through force of will, but through understanding. This is a point the Buddha stresses again and again. If you’re going to overcome these things, you have to understand them. You can’t just push them away or deny their existence or will yourself to dissociate from them. There’s another way, by watching them carefully. Simply as events in the mind, without your idea of your being there, being your desire, or your passion, or your aversion, or your delusion. Simply watch them as events. See how they come about, see how they go, what they leave in their wake. And as you develop this sense of the observer that’s well-established, that doesn’t get blown around by these things. In other words, when the force of these floods comes flooding through the mind, you don’t get washed away. You have an island, you have a high land on which to stand. And when you don’t identify with them, you don’t have to hold onto them, you don’t have to keep them, you don’t have to store them away. Just watch them as things coming through the mind. And after a while, you begin to see what their subterfuges are, what their tricks are, how they deceive you into falling in line with them. And you realize that you have the choice to follow them or not. And, of course, you see that if they do nothing but pull you down, leave you in slavery, you’re not going to follow them. You’re going to choose to be free. This involves a major reorganization of your mind, a major reorganization of your priorities, a major reorganization, a new look at how the mind operates, a reorganization of the power patterns in your mind. Now, that kind of revolution requires that you have a good, solid place on which to stand. The insights that will lead you to this reorganization come when you’ve got the mind solid and still. And they can do their work properly where the mind has that good sense of feeling at home in that solid and still place. So whatever’s required to develop that sense of being at home here in the present moment, being solid, being still, not being the sort of person who gets blown away by things that are happening in the mind. Whatever’s needed to develop that sense of stability, you work at it. Make that your goal. Learn how to relate to that goal in an intelligent way, in a mature way. Approach it systematically. Notice how you get to a state of solidity, where it begins to feel good, where there’s a sense of ease, where there’s a sense of rapture that comes up in the present moment. Notice those things. What did you do to get there? Next time you meditate, can you recreate those conditions? If you try recreating the conditions and it doesn’t work well, adjust things a little bit. Experiment. Because the way you approach the concentration is going to affect the way you get there, your ability to get there and to stay there. If you rush in and feel frustrated very easily, the mind is not going to settle down. You have to be patient. You have to be observant. You have to approach it with good humor. Because these qualities then become embedded in the concentration itself. But you have to be determined. Again, concentration is a very determined state of mind in the sense that it’s not willing to get knocked around by things. So as you imbue your approach to concentration with these qualities, you find that you do get more and more focused. You’re more familiar with a state of mind that is solid and secure. It feels good being here. It feels like you’ve come back home after being off away for who knows how long. And then once you’re home, it might look like this. Then you can start rearranging the priorities in your mind, doing all the major work that has to be done. So many people get to concentration and then just want to hang out there. You do hang out for a while, but then you have to realize that you’re not doing this just to feel good in the present moment. There’s more serious work that has to be done. Because if you have just a concentrated state of mind, then when aging, illness, and death hit, the concentration may not be equal to it. This is why you have to work on your discernment. But the discernment needs this foundation. This is the part of the meditation that you can will, that you can do. You can will yourself into a good state. If you’re observant, you’re training your will. You’re training your desire for stability so that it actually gives results. Then, when you’ve got this good vantage point, you’re in a position where you really can see the movements of the mind and start rearranging your priorities. You’re in a position where you can observe what’s really going on when, say, passion arises in the mind. What’s really going on when aversion arises? How does delusion sneak in? And as you observe these things more and more carefully, you begin to see that you don’t have to be overpowered by them. Once you realize you have your choice, of course you’re going to take the choice to be free. But it’s a choice based on a stable state of mind. The dispassion that comes is not so much a hatred of things; it’s more a growing up. Realizing that you’ve had enough of that, you’ve been fooled long enough. You’ve fooled yourself long enough. Now’s your chance. Now’s your opportunity to choose freedom. That’s a choice that’s made from a good, solid state. So that’s what you can work on. Work on the solidity of your mind. Work on the sense of well-being in that solidity. Then you’ll find that it leads you to where you want to go.

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