Maintaining Stillness

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Meditation is a way of showing goodwill for yourself. When we meditate, we’re not causing any harm for ourselves at all. We’re giving ourselves a foundation for happiness that doesn’t change, a happiness that won’t turn on us, a happiness that won’t disappoint us. Of course, when you’re being good to yourself in this way, you’re being good to the people around you as well, because most of the harm, most of the evil that you see going on in the world these days is because people cause so much suffering from themselves, their suffering, so they find it easy to make other people suffer as well. So the cure is for each of us to turn around and look at the ways in which we’re causing ourselves to suffer, realizing that we have the choice not to do things that way. This is an important point. This is where we’re actually insight to develop out of a practice, seeing precisely where we’re causing suffering and that we don’t have to do it. There are other ways of acting. But to see these ways requires that the mind be still and that we learn to keep the mind still in all sorts of situations. All too often it’s easy to get the mind to settle down as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. The trick lies in maintaining that same sense of balance, that same sense of stillness, even in the midst of the movement of the body, in the midst of activity of all kinds, because you want to be able to see how many different ways you cause yourself to suffer. And they don’t all show up here as you’re sitting in meditation. Sometimes they’ll show up in other situations. So you need to be able to take this ability to see, which requires that you be still, and take it with you wherever you go, in the midst of all kinds of activities. John Fung once said there are three stages to the meditation. One is knowing how to do it, the second is knowing how to maintain it, and the third is knowing how to put it to use. The doing is not all that hard. Just focus on your breath and there you are. But to make it more than just one breath and then comes in the maintaining. That’s where you need to use your powers of endurance, your powers of ingenuity, all your mental abilities to learn how to keep the mind here, with the breath in the present moment, in a way that you can maintain steadily, continuously. Part of it involves getting the breath comfortable. Part of it involves learning how to take that sense of comfort and spread it through the whole body. So you’re going to spread your awareness through the whole body as well. Sometimes the awareness spreads first. Sometimes the comfort spreads first. But either way, what you want is a whole-body awareness, because that’s the kind of concentration, that’s the kind of stillness that you can take with you. If you’re concentrated just on one spot, as soon as your attention leaves that spot, it’s gone. It’s dead. But if the range of your concentration fills the whole body, then even though other things come in, you have to deal with other issues in life. But you’ve got this background, this whole-body awareness that you’re in touch with. That doesn’t have to get knocked off when the mind works with other things, when it deals with other issues in life. And it’s then when you learn how to maintain this sense of being centered, this sense of being established, firmly based, that’s when you can really put it to use. Because it’s from that frame of reference you have that you can see the movements of the mind. When the mind goes running out after an object, you actually feel it as a current coming out of the body sometimes. It comes right out of the heart area. It runs here, it runs there. Normally, we just run along with it. But when you have this foundation and you’re learning how to maintain it in all situations, there’ll have to come a point when you see the current run, but you’re not running with it. Then you realize you have the choice. And this is the choice right here. There’s a point where you made the choice not to run. In the beginning, you might not have been too conscious of that choice, but after a while, you begin to see the earlier and earlier and earlier stages of that current as it begins to form. That way, you get quicker and quicker at not following it. And you also begin to see the whole process of how these currents form to begin with. Exactly what is the process of ignorance and attachment and clinging and craving? Where do these things get involved so that these currents form? Sometimes there are currents that are the result of past action, but what you’re really interested in are the ones that are the result of present action, basically, to see what you’re doing and to see how you’re at one point in the present, you begin to play along with impulses from the past. Because no matter what you experience, there’s always an element of present intention. And that’s hard to see unless you get the mind very still and used to being still in all kinds of situations. This is why in the monastery we have a fair number of activities that everybody has to be involved in. Instead of finding a staff that does all the work while the meditators do nothing but walk and sit, walk and sit, because a meditation that can last only when you walk and sit doesn’t really give you the opportunity to see the mind in other situations. So although there are lots of things that don’t happen in the monastery, lots of jobs that we don’t take on, there’s still enough so that the meditation can get tested to see how continuously you can maintain this sense of being established, grounded, centered. With this full body awareness. Because that gives you the context from which you then can see things as they’re happening in the mind. And you see the choices that are being made. And each time you see a choice, you begin to notice which choices lead to suffering, even the slightest little bit of disturbance, and which ones don’t. And again, you have the choice here as well. You pursue this issue. In all kinds of contexts, those teachings that the Buddha gave to Rahula about looking at your intentions, looking at your actions, seeing what kind of results you get, learning to stop doing things that cause harm, those apply in all areas of the practice. When you’re sitting here in concentration, you can move from one level of concentration to another by simply just noticing that fact, that the type of concentration you have has a certain amount of stress at some point. It’s an integral part of that level of concentration. Can you let go of what you’re doing that causes that stress? When you find that you can, that you have a choice of another way of staying concentrated that doesn’t involve that stress, you go immediately to the other level, a deeper level, more refined. And you keep this up until finally you get to as far as concentration can take you. From that point on, the next things that are going to be let go are a lot more important. But again, it’s simply a question of seeing where the mind is causing stress for itself, disturbance for itself, even in the most slightest refined form. When you catch yourself doing that, creating that stress, and you see precisely what’s causing that stress, then you can let go. That’s the path. Another context is simply being aware of your sensory processes, noticing how you focus the eye on certain objects. What thoughts build up around those objects. Seeing the process as it’s happening, rather than running along with the current, but simply looking at the process and seeing exactly where in the process you’re causing self-stress and suffering, either physical or mental. Notice what you’re doing and notice if you can look at things in a different way. Take, for instance, when you see something and you like it. There’s the act of seeing and the act of liking, which are two separate things. We’re so used to them coming together that we don’t really notice that they are separate. When you see that they’re separate, it’s like the old koan about the one hand clapping. The two hands clapping, of course, is seeing the thing you like and then immediately responding with liking, or seeing the thing you don’t like and responding with the thing you don’t like. There’s the seeing and there’s the liking or disliking. Those are the two hands clapping. But if there’s a seeing without the liking or disliking, when you can stop yourself, from taking that next step, it’s like one hand clapping. There’s just the seeing, just the seeing, just the seeing. Then you realize you have the choice to clap with two hands or clap with one. That’s just one example. You can look at the process of sensory involvement or your engagement with the senses and follow the same principles that the Buddha taught Rahula. Notice where you do things that cause suffering. Simply in the way you look, the way you listen, the way you think, and learn how to let go of those things. So the principle is the same across the board, looking for where there’s stress, where there’s disturbance, and seeing what you’re doing to cause that. This is why the Buddha had Rahula start with that issue of what you’re doing, because the doing is the important part. That’s the part you can change. And you test it by learning to be very, very sensitive to where there’s the slightest bit of stress or suffering. This is why we make the mind still. This is why we give the mind a sense of real ease in the meditation. The more ease the mind experiences, the more quickly it can detect stress and suffering. So this is how you do the meditation, this is how you maintain it, and this is how you put it to use. So make sure you understand all three steps and that you work at the maintaining, because that of all the steps is the one that requires the most effort and the most determination, to make it as continuous as possible through all sorts of circumstances, so that the opportunity to gain insight will be present in all circumstances as well.

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