Continental Shelf, The

August 9, 2004

In training the mind, you have to pay attention to the details. Break the practice down into small, manageable steps and keep very careful watch over them. We like to think that because the mind settled down in the past, it shouldn’t be hard this time. It should get easier and easier. And that’s partly right, but partly wrong. It’s wrong if you start getting sloppy. Be about the steps. So try to be meticulous. Try to be careful. This breath, this breath, this breath, whatever steps you find help the mind to settle down. Be willing to patiently keep going with them, going over them again. If you start getting sloppy, you start getting careless. Sometimes the results will still be there, but they start unraveling. If you’re not willing to go back and start with your ABCs again, you’re going to have trouble getting the mind to settle down. So each time you practice your mind, you have to be very careful. Pay attention to what you’re doing. So much of the Buddhist teachings are implied in that. One, the instructions on being heedful. You’ve got to watch out for whatever qualities are going to come into the mind. You’ve got to keep your mind guarded against unskillful qualities, which include complacency and impatience. You can’t let things go on automatic pilot, because if they’re on automatic pilot, you’re not watching. And how is discernment going to arise when you’re not watching? An important part of the middle path is your ability to monitor it, to make sure it stays on the middle, that what you’re doing is appropriate for what’s happening right now, and it’s a simple act of monitoring what you’re doing, being very careful. That’s what develops your faculty of discernment. That’s how insight gets developed. When the Buddha described the path, he compared it to the continental shelf off of India. There’s a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. It’s the same when we’re practicing. There’s a gradual path we have to follow, and then when insight comes, it is an event, a particular event that happens at a point in time and opens things up radically inside the mind. We read about those radical openings and think we can just sit here and wait for them to happen. It doesn’t happen that way. You have to prepare the qualities of the mind that are going to enable that to happen. So when insight comes, it really does penetrate. You’ve softened the soil. So when the rain finally falls, it can seep into the soil and not just wash off. So don’t think of insight as something that comes out of nowhere, hits you upside the head, and then leaves you. The faculty of discernment is something you can develop, and you develop by watching what you’re doing. In the beginning, that simply means being very careful in the steps. Make sure you don’t skip over anything. Anything that you’ve found has worked in the past. Remember that. See if your mind is in the same state it was the last time your meditation worked well. If it’s not, which direction is it wandering off? Is it wandering off to the left, wandering off to the right? In other words, too little energy, too much energy? Is it leaning forward or leaning back? Too much anticipation or too much dwelling on the past? Try to find the middle in all of this. Keep monitoring to see how things are going, what you might want to improve, what you might want to change. If things aren’t working, use your ingenuity. In this way, the faculty of discernment gets developed and gets more and more precise. This is how you gain those subtle insights that you’re going to need. You read some of the passages in the texts. The Buddha talks about clinging to views of being and views of non-being. Those are all awfully subtle matters. How are you going to get there? You don’t get there by theorizing. You try to bring the mind to a point where it actually sees these things happening. That requires that you make your powers of discernment more and more subtle, more and more alert to what’s happening right now. This is how you do it. Focusing on the breath. If the breath is comfortable, change. If the breath is comfortable, leave it comfortable. Try to maintain that. See what you have to do in order to be relaxed around that sense of comfort in a way that allows it to continue. If it’s not comfortable, change. That in and of itself contains the seeds for the Four Noble Truths and a lot of the other insights you’re going to need. Looking at things simply in terms of stress, lack of stress, and what you’re doing that’s causing the stress, and what you can do to relieve the stress. You start with the breath because it’s more blatant. Then you move to the mind. This is where a lot of the interesting work happens as you begin to see what concepts you’re holding on to that are getting in the way of the mind’s truly being at ease. So it’s not creating unnecessary suffering for itself. In the beginning, it’s the grosser things. Anticipating the future, reliving the past, all the narratives that we can tend to get tied up in. You have to learn how to take those apart. The best way to take the past apart is to ask yourself, “What lessons have I learned from the past? What mistakes did I make, and how do I properly relate to those mistakes? What lessons did I learn from them that I don’t want to repeat those mistakes so I don’t repeat those mistakes again?” Then you drop the past. Take what you can learn from it and keep it there. As for the future, the future is very uncertain, although we do know that aging, illness, and death are coming. So you make use of those thoughts. That’s a way of impressing on yourself how important it is to practice right here in the present moment. Then when you get in the present moment, you find there are burdens here as well. You’re sitting here, you can drop any perception of the room around you, of the people around you. You don’t have to carry that right now. And it’s an important part of the ability to stay focused, is that you learn how to drop your concerns about unnecessary things. Drop your baggage. There’s a story I’ve told many times about a Chan Lee taking a group of people on a trip to the forest. The first thing they did was they got on a train in Bangkok and they rode up to Lopurti, got off the train, and then went into the forest there. They were both laypeople and monks. A lot of monks had never been on a forest trip before, and a lot of laypeople had never been on a forest trip before. So the night before they left, they’d made lots of preparations. They showed up at the train station with lots of baggage. Chan Lee took one look at that. Instead of getting on the train, he started walking down the tracks. Well, when Chan walks down the tracks, you don’t get on the train. You have to follow him walking down the tracks as well. Of course, people started complaining, “He had all this luggage. Why was he making them do this?” He didn’t say anything to begin with, and then finally he said, “Look, if it’s heavy, throw it away.” So people stopped and sorted out their luggage, kept only what was really necessary, and whatever was remaining they threw into the lotus ponds on the side of the railroad track there. By the time they got to the next station, a little bit further up the line, he looked around. Everybody had a nice light load. Then he let them get on the train. The lesson is, of course, don’t carry around unnecessary baggage. That’s not just the past and the future. You’ve got a lot of unnecessary concepts about what’s happening in the present moment right now, what’s around you. For the purpose of staying with the breath, if you notice those thoughts, drop them. Hold on only to the concepts that help you stay focused on the breath. The sense of immediate ease you can create in the body right now, however you find you can do that, then maintain it. And as you stick with it, you begin to see concepts and other things that are really not necessary for maintaining that sense of ease and stillness, so you can drop them. Sometimes you drop a few things that are necessary for maintaining the stillness. Well, take note of that, back up, and bring that thought to bear on the present moment again. This way you’re playing two roles at once. One is keeping the mind still, and the other is watching over and monitoring it. This is how transcendental tranquility and insight work together. By keeping the mind balanced, by keeping, when you get a good state, maintaining that balance. And as you maintain it, as things begin to settle down, you can see things a lot more clearly. Your powers of perception get more and more subtle. So this is how gradually you develop discernment. And the point will come, of course, when discernment cuts through the right spot, opens you up to another dimension entirely. It’s like the forces that calve icebergs off of continental ice shelves. There’s a pressure, pressure, pressure, and you don’t see anything happening for long periods of time, and then all of a sudden, a huge block of ice drops off into the ocean. It’s not that the forces to cause it dropped off in the ocean suddenly happened right then. They’ve been happening all along. But they finally reached a breaking point. It’s the same with this gradual path that we’re practicing. We keep applying the pressure of the practice, the pressure of mindfulness and alertness, monitoring what we’re doing, adjusting, monitoring some more, seeing where this is unnecessary or that’s unnecessary, letting it drop, letting it drop. So your stillness gets more and more solid, and at the same time, less and less of a burden on the mind. And as you develop your powers of perception, your powers of discernment, doing this, that pressure of the practice suddenly culminates in a breaking point. And you can call it sudden or you can call it gradual. It’s both. You can’t determine the point when the sudden insight is going to happen, but you can apply the pressure of just keeping at the practice, keeping at the practice, being observant, watching what works, watching what doesn’t work, making whatever adjustments you have to. I once heard someone describe their practice as sitting around waiting for a spiritual accident to happen. That’s entirely wrong. You’re here applying what powers of discernment, what powers of steadiness you have. You keep at it, keep at it. So when insights come, they’re not an accident. They’ve been a long time in the making.

[https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2004/040809%20Continental%20Shelf,%20The.mp3](https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2004/040809%20Continental%20Shelf%2C%20The.mp3)