Tuning the Practice

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You probably know the story of Sona, the monk who was very delicately brought up. He was pushing himself so hard in the practice that he was getting more and more discouraged. The more he pushed himself, he was getting ready to disrobe. So the Buddha went to see him and taught him the simile of the lute. The strings of the lute are stretched too tight. When you try to play them, they snap. If they’re too loose, you don’t get any really good sound out of them. It’s only when they’re tuned just right that the lute sounds good. You can play it. It’s the same with your meditation. You have to tune your meditation to the level of your energy. Just like the five strings of the lute will have one that you take as the first one you tune, and then you tune the rest of them in. You have to be in harmony with the first one, with the five faculties. The one of persistence, or energy, is the one that you have to tune first. That’s what determines how sustainable your practice is going to be, what kind of practice will be sustainable. That’s the first factor you have to bring into consideration. How much energy do you have? Fortunately, energy is not just a given. You can strengthen it with the other factors. Just like when you play a chord on the lute, the overtones of the different strings reinforce one another. In the same way, the different faculties of conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment can increase your energy if they’re all in tune. So you can deal with the two big issues that come up when you think about sustainable practice. One is how to sustain it in difficult situations. It’s important that you learn how to stay with the breath in order to do that. That requires powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, together with a conviction that this really will make a difference. If you’re not convinced that it’s going to work, you just don’t have the energy to put into it. We’ve talked for several days now about the breath energy in the body. It’s about forming a shield or filling the body in such a way that negative energies from outside can’t come in. This is important. The Buddha has the image of a hardwood door. When mindfulness fills the body, when the breath fills the body, it says Mara can’t gain a foothold. Maybe the people you’re dealing with are not quite up to the level of Mara, but so much the better. If Mara can’t gain a foothold, then the people you’re dealing with in daily life don’t have to gain a foothold either. In other words, try to keep the breath solid. John Lee talks about the Thai word “neo,” which means tough and solid, viscous. If you look at the way the breath energy flows in the body, you can begin to detect there are gaps in the energy. Think of ways of keeping the breath more and more continuous, more and more solid, all throughout the body, so that you begin to have an energy that actually radiates out, fills the body, and forms a shield around it, so that you’re not sucking in negative energies from outside. There’s so much outside, not just dealing with people who are extreperous or difficult, who may be people you love very much, but they can sap your energy. You’ve got to have your energy field strong and solid. You’ve got to be aware of it, because you’re in the possession of the things you bring in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, all the mass media that are designed to weaken our strength, that are designed to wear our strength down, to pull our attention out, to get us to want this, to desire that, to get angry about this, whatever. You’ve got to check your strength. How much of that can you take without it eating away at you? It’s a matter of learning how both to husband your strength, increase your strength by learning how to deal with the breath, keep it solid throughout the whole body, continuous throughout the body. It’s not a question of learning how to shut out negative influences. We have a tendency to suck in negative influences from outside, either from people that we’re face-to-face with or other energies that come through what we read and what we look at. To use another analogy, it’s like the issues surrounding disease, how to prevent disease. One is to build up your resistance, and the other one is to make sure you don’t bring in any germs. That requires mindfulness of the breath, concentration, and then discernment about what you’re going to bring in. You have to see your own strength. This is where that tuning of that first string is important. How much can you take in? How much can you bring in? How much can you handle? Do your best not to overwhelm yourself, not to sap your strength in ways that you don’t have to. Then there’s the question of sustainability over the long haul. When you start looking at the practice as part of the general journey of your life, how fast can you go? How much time do you get to give to the practice over time? That’s something, again, that depends on your energy and your opportunities. The issue lies both in gauging your energy and opportunities and also trying to maximize them. Sometimes when we start thinking about the long haul, we have very unskillful ways of conceiving what we have to do in order to maintain the long haul. The way we set up goals for ourselves, whether the goals are realistic or not. And then if we happen not to make the goals happen, how we treat ourselves. Watch for that and see what techniques are skillful and which ones are not. Although they may tell you in meditation retreats not to have goals, that works only during a short-term meditation retreat. When you think about the practice over the long haul, you’ve got to have goals, not only the final goals but also intermediate goals along the way. But you have to have a mature attitude towards them, one in learning how to set intelligence and goals and learning how to change your intermediate goals as you get a better and better sense of what you’re capable of and how you treat yourself when you don’t live up to them. The goals are there to encourage you. They’re not there to beat yourself over the head with or discourage yourself with. So try to use them wisely. The whole practice is a practice of what works. We learn that through trial and effort. It’s only through trial and effort that we gain a sense of what our energy level is, what we’re capable of, and how we can maximize that. Like Bodhi keeps talking about the middle way. What’s our middle way? It’s the middle way where that string that corresponds to our level of energy is tuned just right. Remember, they gave this analogy back in the days when they didn’t have an absolute A or an absolute C or whatever in the scale. You tuned it for what was just right for your instrument. So you find the level that’s right for you. That’s where the Majjhima is. And this can be found only through trial and error. And when you’re looking for things through trial and error, you have to learn how to deal with error properly. So it’s actually a teaching tool, that it’s helpful. The Buddha had a very pragmatic attitude towards truth. Truth is what works. So whatever’s a truly good technique in the meditation is one that works for you. And as you explore that issue of exactly what’s just right for you, that’s what develops your discernment. And as your discernment develops, it brings all the other faculties in along with it. Your conviction gets stronger. Your level of energy grows stronger. Your concentration, your mindfulness, all grow stronger. So it’s in this way that they reinforce one another. So you can sustain your practice, not only in the face of difficult situations, but also over the long haul. It’s a practice you can live with. Because you keep paying attention to what is that just rightness—the just rightness in your level of energy, the just rightness in your practice as a whole. And which techniques of talking to yourself, teaching yourself, encouraging yourself, urging yourself on, when is the right time for those different activities, and exactly how much is just right in those activities, you learn only from watching, observing, testing, trying again. It’s that willingness to keep trying that’s going to sustain you. to stay in the practice.

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