Adjusting the Practice

September 15, 2004

The chant just now said that associating with wise people is a blessing. And there are wise people outside and wise people inside. When you’re meditating, you want to pay a lot of attention to the wise people inside. In other words, the voices in the mind, the thoughts that say, “Stay here. Stay here in the present. Stay with the breath.” You don’t have to get involved with anything outside, any other issues. Leave them all at the door, all the issues you’ve carried from wherever you’ve come from. And do your best to have a clean slate. In other words, any thought that would come into your mind right now that would remind you of who you are, what your identity is, which century you’re living in, just put them aside. All you’ve got is the breath, which is the same for people in the 21st century as it was for people back in the 4th, 5th, and 6th century B.C. The specifics of the problems in your mind may be specific to you, specific to this point in time and place, but the general principles are the same as they’ve always been. We all have greed, anger, and delusion, and they cause suffering, both for ourselves and for people around us. Those are like the fools in our mind. And as the chant said, you want to avoid them and hang around with the wise people, the thoughts that recommend mindfulness, that recommend concentration, that recommend staying with the breath, giving it time, learning to be on good terms with the breath. Sometimes it’s very easy to fall into the misunderstanding when you’re meditating. It seems difficult to stay with a meditation object that’s becoming your enemy. And with some meditation objects, that’s not such a big deal. If you don’t like the object, you can change. But if your breath becomes your enemy, you’re in big trouble. So you want to do your best to be on good terms with it. When it comes in, let it come in in a way that feels comfortable. When it goes out, let it go out in a way that feels comfortable. Don’t try to force it too much. If it doesn’t feel quite right, you can nudge it in different directions. You can make it a little bit longer, a little bit shorter, deeper, a little bit more shallow. And the nudge only has to be a thought. If the breath seems too long, just make it shorter. Let the body do its own job of making it shorter. How do you know that it’s too long? Well, if there’s a feeling of tightness as you’re breathing in. When you’re breathing out, there’s a feeling that you’re squeezing it out. That’s a sign you’re letting it go on too long. You can stop. Let it come in and out without making much of an impact on the body at all, aside from feeling nourishing as it comes in and relaxing as it goes out. We’re not here to breathe the perfect breath, but we are here to allow ourselves to feel comfortable in the present moment. Feel comfortable with the breath. You can choose whatever spot in the body you want to focus on. Again, it’s a matter of individual choice. A lot of concentration practice is just that. Whatever brings the mind to stillness is fine. There’s a story they tell in the commentaries of a monk who couldn’t keep his mind concentrated on anything, any of the traditional subjects. So the Buddha gave him a piece of cloth and said, “Just rub your hand over this piece of cloth again and again and again.” And for some reason, that heat of concentration he found common. And in rubbing it, he began to notice that the cloth was getting dirty. After all those rubs, it’s picking up sweat, picking up whatever was in his hand. Just that much gave him a sense of disenchantment with the body, enough to make his mind go to an even deeper level. So do what you can to make the breath congenial. When things are congenial inside, then the mind feels ready to settle down. And it can start listening more and more to those wise voices inside. Once the mind feels rested and feels nourished, it’s a much better shape to gain insight than if it’s feeling frazzled and at loose ends. Because when it’s frazzled, it’ll just grab at anything or not accept anything at all. In other words, it’s not balanced. And when it’s not balanced, it won’t listen to balanced commentary on what’s going on inside. It tends to grab at extremes. When Dharma teacher once asked me how I treated people who had gained stream entry and were found very disorienting, I immediately questioned the idea that anyone would find stream entry disorienting. It’s actually a very orienting experience, a very strong sense of coming home, seeing things you didn’t see before. That sets everything into perspective. The people who find meditative experiences disorienting are the ones whose minds are settled down and they’re grabbing at extremes, which is not what we want. A lot of insight comes in finding what is just right, and that’s so much of the middle way right there, what amount of effort is just right right now. There’s a famous story where Sona, one of the monks who had been very delicately brought up, was pushing himself very hard in the prime practice, doing walking meditation to the point where his feet were bleeding. He sat down and started reflecting on himself and was getting discouraged. He said, “Here, I put all this effort in. Still nothing’s happened.” The Buddha came to him and asked him, “Back when you were a lay person, did you play the lute?” “Well, yes, I have.” Sona answered, “And if the strings were too tight, how did it sound? It didn’t sound good at all. If the strings were too loose, you didn’t get anything out of it.” He said, “Well, in the same way, tune your persistence, tune your level of effort and energy to what’s just right, and then tune all the other elements of the practice to that, like tuning five strings on a lute. First you tune one string so it sounds just right, and then you tune the remaining strings.” So here’s the amount of energy you can put into the practice. This is something that varies from person to person. Some people can throw a lot of energy into it and they come out just fine. Because they’re up for it. Other people can’t quite make that level. So you find the level of energy that’s appropriate for you, and then all the other elements should be tuned to that. In this way, the practice becomes one you can live with. It’s not so tight that it snaps after a while. It’s not so loose that it never really goes anywhere. And it’s not the case that one particular level of effort or energy will always be right for you all the time. Meditators go through cycles. It’s kind of a rhythm to the practice. And so for each particular meditation session you have to take things into consideration. How is the body right now? What mental state are you in right now? Are you up for strong practice, or is it a time to take things a bit more easy, to emphasize the stillness more, the element of calm? This varies from person to person, from time to time. And the discernment comes in seeing precisely that. We tend to think that discernment comes in seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. You have to see things are inconstant, stressful, and not self to get anywhere at all in the practice. But that’s not how discernment is developed. You start out by looking at what’s skillful and what’s unskillful in your practice. And a lot of that comes down to finding what is just right in the practice. There are passages in the Canon that seem to make the practice sound almost automatic. Once you make the first right step in any direction, everything else inevitably follows on that. But that’s not the case. You have to keep adjusting the practice as you go along. It’s like walking a tightrope. Getting on the tightrope is a good first step, but that’s not going to guarantee you’re going to get to the other end. You’ve got to maintain your balance all along the way. And it’s in maintaining the balance that your abilities of discernment get sharpened. There’s a teaching on balancing the calming and energizing aspects of the practice under the seven factors of awakening. The energizing factors are energy, analysis of what’s going on in the mind, and rapture, a strong sense of refreshment coming from the practice. All these three factors give energy to your practice. And the three that are more common are serenity, concentration, and equanimity. Again, you have to look at where you are to figure out which elements you want to stress. If you’re feeling very drowsy, don’t emphasize serenity, equanimity, and concentration. You want to emphasize more the elements of analysis of what’s going on, what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. In other words, get the mind to start thinking, get the juices flowing. Keep at it. It’ll bring a sense of refreshment in the mind if you do it right. On the other hand, if you’re feeling very frenetic and very worn out, you don’t want to do a lot of analysis. You want to just allow the mind to be more serene, more concentrated, and more equanimous. Bring a state of balance. As for mindfulness, the very first of the factors awakening, the Buddha said that’s always appropriate. In other words, one, keeping in mind what you’re doing, and two, being alert to see what’s going on. Watch what you’re doing and see what the results are. In this way, as you find balance among the factors, whichever ones have to be stressed at any particular point in the practice, your powers of discernment become sharper. In this way, concentration practice becomes inseparable from your discernment practice. To this extent, it’s simply doing concentration properly, getting the mind centered and keeping it in a balanced state. It not only requires discernment, but it also develops it. A lot of the wisdom of the path as a whole lies in finding its middleness as the middle way. Again, it doesn’t mean a middling or mediocre level of effort. It means the effort that’s just right for what you’ve got right now. Learning how to read the mind, read the body, and prescribe whatever medicine it needs. You’re diagnosing an illness here. We all have problems in the body. We all have illnesses in the mind. The practice is teaching us to become our own doctor. It’s about diagnosing things, prescribing the proper medicine, and then taking the medicine. After all, it’s not doctors that cure an illness. It’s the patient who follows the doctor’s orders and then comes back and reports to the doctor, “This is what happened when I followed your orders.” And the doctor says, “That’s not quite right. Let’s change the dosage a little bit,” or whatever. It’s in the dialogue between the patient and the doctor that understanding arises. Here you’re being both the doctor and the patient. So there’s going to have to be this internal dialogue during the practice and then checking on the results. In the beginning, you’re very much a student doctor learning the ropes. You’re going to make your mistakes. As all student doctors do. Fortunately, the patient doesn’t die. As long as you keep coming back to the practice, there’s always hope for cure. With time, as you learn to read the results of your actions—one, recognizing what you’ve been doing in the practice, and then two, reading the results and deciding whether they’re satisfactory or not—this is how the doctor becomes more and more skilled, more and more experienced. So it’s always wise to approach the practice from the point of view of finding balance. Finding it, recognizing it, and then learning how to maintain it. It’s wise both in the sense that that’s a good general rule of thumb every time you come to the practice, and wise in the sense that it develops your powers of discernment, exercises your discernment, so it becomes more and more precise. (birds chirping)

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