Path Requires Effort, The

July 12, 2005

One of the basic principles of the practice is that it’s through effort that you overcome suffering, that you overcome stress. We don’t like to hear that. We prefer that all you have to do is just let go, let go, relax, and that’s the end of it. But it doesn’t work that way. The path, as the Buddha describes it, is one of developing as well as letting go. You have to have both sides. An important part of a right effort is developing the desire to do the building and developing as well as the desire to do the letting go. First, while you’re practicing here with the breath, focus your attention on where the breath seems most obvious. You know now the breath is going in, now the breath is going out. Stick with it. It’s the sticking with it that makes all the difference. Sometimes you find people say, “Well, I’ve done a little concentration. I know what it’s like. I want to go beyond it.” You don’t want to be attached. You’ve got to be attached. You’ve got to have a desire for the concentration. You’ve got to respect concentration. If you’re really going to get results out of your path. So when the mind wanders off, you bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. If it starts complaining, “I don’t like bringing it back,” just bring it back. You have to show more respect for the concentration than you do for your moods. The mind may start complaining, “This is dumb, just looking at the breath. Why can’t we think about things that are more interesting?” This is the groundwork. This is the foundation. If the foundation isn’t strong, then all the thinking you do will just crash. It’s like a building without a foundation. The slightest little earthquake, the slightest little breeze, and the whole thing comes tumbling down. So foundation work is not all that interesting. It’s like building this monastery. The first several years, most of the work went underground, bringing in pipes, digging for the septic system, all the stuff that went down underground, all that money that went down underground. People kept saying, “We’ve given all this money. We’ve done all this work. Where is it?” Well, it’s all underground. But now that it’s underground, now we can start building on top of it. Without the underground work, you might have huts, but you wouldn’t have a place to go to the bathroom. Or you wouldn’t have water properly piped in, so it wouldn’t be livable. So even though it’s unromantic and unexciting, it’s still necessary work. And you have to respect the necessary work, because in the process of getting the mind to settle down, you’re learning a lot of interesting things about the mind, just through this effort of coming back, coming back. You learn a lot of unexpected things about the mind. It’s easy to read books about Buddhism and say, “Well, you have to let go of your sense of self. Let’s just do that and not bother with the other stuff.” But it doesn’t work that way. When you actually bring the mind to concentration, you find there are other things getting in the way that are a lot more pressing. You’ve got to deal with those first, before you can get to the more subtle stuff. So when the mind wanders off and you bring it back, don’t think of this as being tedious. There’s an opportunity for learning here, one getting some finesse in how to bring the mind back to the breath in a way that it likes coming back. This is why it’s so important to make the breath comfortable. As you’re sitting here focusing on the breath, notice, is the way you’re focusing on the breath making it tight and constricted? You’ve got to loosen up a little bit, otherwise the mind is not going to want to come back. When you breathe in and out, exactly where do you feel the breath? Is it just air coming in out of the nose? Or are there other sensations that go along with the in-breath, other sensations that go along with the out-breath? They can be anywhere on the body, because the way you hold the body to breathe can either create a great sense of ease or it can create a lot of tension. Your internal, mental, picture of your body, your internal mental picture of the breathing, have you ever really explored those? And how do those mental pictures affect the way you breathe? How do they affect your posture? The Buddha said it’s possible simply by being with the breath to have a sense of ease and rapture that can fill the whole body. Is your breath anything like that? If not, there are several ways you can change it. You make it longer, you make it shorter, deeper, more shallow. Think of it coming in and out of different parts of the body. Think of it not so much as air coming in and out, but as energy flowing through the body. In what ways does the energy flow that it feels good, and in what ways does it flow that it doesn’t feel so good? There’s a story of Hakuin the Zen Master who, after years of meditating, complained of what he called zen sickness. That’s not just zen people who get it. A lot of meditators get it. As soon as you focus on the breath, there’s pressure up in your head. That’s because you’re pulling all the energy in your body up into the head. You’ve got to think of it settling down, melting down into your legs and your arms, your hands. What causes that zen sickness is the way you tense up and pull up as you breathe in, maybe conscious, maybe subconscious. But if you work with the breath, you find it gets more and more conscious. You begin to see how these things happen. You get more grounded in the body. You get more and more at home at the spot where the mind and the body meet at the breath. Because it’s right here that you’re going to see interesting things, not only about the body, but also about the mind. In particular, you’re going to see more and more how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself. But you begin seeing that as you deal with the breath. Your preconceived notions about the breath can create unnecessary suffering in the breathing. Again, as I said, the Buddha said you can breathe in such a way that the whole body feels refreshed and full, just breathing. So you’ve got to see what’s standing in the way. Part of it’s going to be letting go, but part of it’s going to be developing things like mindfulness. Developing the desire to stick with it. We’re sometimes told, the Buddha said, “Desire is a bad thing. It’s the cause for suffering.” Well, that certain desires are the cause for suffering, and other desires are part of the path. The desire to let go of unskillful habits in the mind, unskillful qualities in the mind, the desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind, that’s an essential part of the path. That’s a part of right effort. In fact, the whole practice comes down to this issue of looking at what’s the most skillful thing to do right now, what’s going to get the best results, and being willing to do whatever it takes. If you have some preconceived notions about, “I’m this kind of person. I can’t do that kind of action or this kind of practice,” or whatever, that’s limiting yourself. The question is not, “Who am I? What is the real me? What kind of person am I?” Just put those issues aside. Look at what’s the most skillful thing to do right now, and how can I figure out how to do it? And if I don’t want to do it, what can I do to control myself into doing it? Whether it’s in terms of what you do or you say or you think, or how you’re focusing on the breath right here, right now, be willing to experiment. Use your ingenuity and then observe. Those are the two words that my teacher, John Fung, used almost more than anything else in his meditation instructions. When you come across an obstacle, try to figure it out. Figure out your way around it. Then try various approaches and observe what works and what doesn’t work. This way, the meditation becomes a skill. Once it’s a skill, then it can really be a foundation for other things. In other words, you can tap into a state of concentration. You can tap into the state of being centered whenever you want it. You can learn how to maintain it throughout the day, as you walk, as you talk, as you do your work. Try to make this your home. So you’re building up skillful qualities and you’re letting go of the unskillful ones. That’s what the path is all about. And the effort lies in, one, having the desire to do this. If you don’t have the desire, working on developing the desire. Being persistent, being intent. Give your full attention to this one big issue, the one that the Buddha said was all he taught. He taught stress and the end of stress. Once you take care of this issue, take care of everything else. And it’s through right effort you’re developing the desire and the persistence and the intent to let go of unskillful qualities in the mind, to prevent unskillful ones that haven’t arisen yet from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities, and then to develop them when they’re arisen. That’s the kind of effort that’s going to put an end to suffering, put an end to stress. So learn to apply that at your own pace. And that’s going to be your foundation.

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