Focus on One Thing

July 22, 2005

If you want to see something in detail, take a careful look. You have to sit very, very still. Otherwise, if you’re moving, then if you see movement in the thing you’re watching, you don’t know whether the movement lies in the thing or it lies in yourself. The more still you are, the more subtle you are. You can see subtle movements. This is why a very important part of meditation is to settle in and be very still. Choose one thing to focus on—the breath. Keep your attention at one spot and watch the breath as it’s coming in and as it’s going out. The one spot can be anywhere—your nose, your throat, your chest, any place where you have a sense that tells you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Watch that sensation. Is it comfortable? If it’s not comfortable, you can let it change. You can make the breath longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow. There are lots of ways you can play with the breath. As the breath gets more refined, then you can see more. If your mind wanders off, bring it right back. Tell yourself, “This is time to stay settled.” It’s when you’re settled that you can do your real work. Tonight’s the first night of the rains retreat. It’s a time for the monks to settle in for three months. The Buddha designed the life of a monk so you could have periods of living in a settled way and periods of wandering around. There are advantages to both. If you spend all your time settled in one place, you get attached to the place. In some ways, you get too comfortable. But if you don’t settle down at all, you see yourself wandering around, reacting to this place, reacting to that place. You don’t have that much time to really see the mind on its own. When the mind is settled in, you can see it clearly. So for three months out of the year, the monks are supposed to stay settled. As for the remaining nine months, how much they want to wander, that’s up to them. It may seem strange to be settling in this time of year. This is a time of year when, in America, everybody wanders around. They go on vacation, they travel, take a break. Whereas the tradition of the monks is now you settle in and this is the time to do real work. When you think about it, this is not a good time for monks to be wandering around in the forest, because all kinds of people are in the forest right now, taking their kids on vacation. The kids, of course, don’t want to go, so they complain and they make trouble. So it’s a good time for the monks to stay put. Even though we normally think of the summer and the hot weather as a time to rest and relax, the fact that it’s hot doesn’t really have anything to do with your mind. The mind can create all kinds of trouble for itself in hot weather just as it can in cold weather. So it’s good to be able to sit down and watch it while you’ve got the chance. This is a time of year when the monks accelerate their efforts in meditation and study. It’s good for laypeople to think about that, too. What in your life still needs improvement? What in your life is still lacking in terms of precepts, in terms of concentration, in terms of discernment? In other words, what’s lacking in the causes for happiness in your life, the causes that you have control over? It’s one of the things you can do this evening. In addition to focusing on your breath, give some time to thinking about what you want to do over the course of the next three months in order to improve your practice. Any areas where you find that you’re weak, you can focus right on that. As I said, as you’re focusing on the practice, you’re focusing on the causes for happiness. Where is your happiness still not satisfactory? Where is it still not gratifying? Where could you really use some lasting happiness in your life? Short-term happiness isn’t hard. The problem is, what are the long-term consequences of that short-term happiness? Long-term happiness takes some effort. But it’s effort well spent. After all, why do we act anyhow? We want happiness. If you want your actions to be intelligent, you have to focus on which kind of happiness gives you the results that are worth all the effort that goes into it. Sometimes you expend a lot of effort and don’t get much to show for it, and you end up with a lot of pain to show for it instead, a lot of regret. So reflect on what you can do for the sake of long-term happiness and make a determination. This is what you’re going to focus on for the next three months. At the end of the three months, see what difference you’ve made. Really settle in on that one topic. Focus on that one topic. Then you begin to get a sense of the power of your own actions, the power of your own intentions and decisions. That what you do really does make a difference, both for your own happiness and for the happiness of the people around you.

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