Working Ourselves Free

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One of the Pali terms for meditation is kammatana, which means the work we have to do. We don’t like to think of the meditation as work. We like to think of it as letting go, being at ease. But doing that consistently, that’s work. It requires that we develop a lot of very important qualities in the mind. Mindfulness, alertness, persistence, right effort. That’s one of the Thai terms for meditation, tam kvampiya, which means to make an effort. It doesn’t mean that you have to do walking meditation for five hours or sitting meditation for ten hours or wearing down the body. The effort is an effort in the mind. Taking care, being mindful, being alert, and doing that consistently. It’s not all that difficult to be able to allow the mind to settle down, relax, let go, be still for a little while. What’s difficult is making it continuous. As John Furlong once said, there are three steps to the meditation. One is learning how to do it, the second is learning how to maintain it, and the third is learning how to put it to use. And the maintaining is where most of the work comes in. In other words, when you’re doing mindfulness, we don’t try to meditate and just get the mind to have a little space of calm and then throw it away. Once the mind has maintained calm, you have to learn how to respect that calm, look after it, protect it. And in the course of doing that, you’re going to find that you learn an awful lot about the mind, the ways the mind is going to slip off, how it slips off. If you look carefully, you’re going to see these things. The insight comes in in the meditation. The Buddha never made a clear line of distinction between tranquility practice and insight practice. Everything he gathered together in the practice of jhana, or absorption, is that if you do it right, the mind has to build both on tranquility and insight. In other words, you need to get the mind to settle down somehow. You need to understand the mind to at least some extent before you get it to stay there. This is right where the insight comes. As soon as you get the mind to settle down, you find it’s going to move. It’s nice to rest, it’s nice to have a little bit of peace and calm, but there are all these other things we have to do. Look into the mind that says that. That’s the troublemaker. The problem is that the mind often sneaks up on you when you’re not looking, which is why you have to keep on looking. Then, bit by bit, you begin to see these things. See how mindfulness lapses. See how the mind throws up little walls of ignorance so that it can do things. That’s a lot of the problem right there. These barriers the mind sets up in the mind, like little screens to hide things from itself. It’s a peculiar habit we have. One part of the mind is lying to another part of the mind. Part of the mind actually does get fooled, and another part really knows what’s going on, but it pretends not to. It’s this make-believe. That’s what causes so much trouble in the mind. You’ve got to learn how to see through it, and the seeing through it comes when you try to be consistently still. So you’ve got the breath comfortable. Breathe in, it feels good. Breathe out, it feels good. Then work on the more subtle breath sensations in the body, patterns of tension, sensations in the chest, the shoulders, the back, the legs, the hips. That’s a form of breath energy as well. Think of everything relaxing all the way out to the pores, every pore. Think of the body as a big sponge. All the pores are open. Then see how long you can maintain that awareness. Because many times it’s the subtle breath energy that’ll squeeze up when you’re ready to latch onto something. It’ll squeeze up when your mindfulness lapses, when your alertness gets less than alert. Then you find the mind scrambling around, trying to find other ways to stay alert. Start thinking about things. You want to look into that, but looking into it while you try to maintain that sense of ease. A lot of insight is little things you see in the mind that you catch out of the corner of your mental eye as the mind is trying to play various tricks on itself, or certain thoughts try to play tricks on the mind to distract you. Once you’re distracted, then it can sneak in, pull their sack over you, get you in the sack, and drag you off and throw you in the East River. By the time you come up, you’ve been swept out to sea, so it’s time to start all over again. But the quicker you are in sensing these things, the less likely they’ll be able to kidnap you. So this is where the work lies in trying to maintain that sense of ease, that sense of being fully alert through the whole body, with all the subtle breath energies, all the way out to the pores of the skin, as open and free-flowing as possible. So it’s an interesting kind of work. It’s work in being at ease, work in being open and relaxed. But very vigilant. Otherwise, you’ll have periods of concentration, and then periods when the concentration disappears. And then when it disappears, all kinds of things can come running into your mind, and the next time you come down to sit and meditate, it’s like it’s a different mind, a whole new cast of characters. Then you have to sort it out. Sort them out again. Which is the irritation, and which is the laziness, and how to counteract the irritation, and how to counteract the laziness, after they’ve taken over the mind. It’s a lot better if you’re there, recognizing them when they come, when they seem tender and innocent and no big deal at all. That’s when you’ve got to be vigilant, because they’re a lot easier to deal with when they’re still small and weak. But it means you need the discernment in order to recognize them for what they are, and also to see which parts of the mind are your fifth column, the ones that are all too ready to play along with distractions. In other words, for concentration to give rise to insight, it has to be as consistent and continuous as possible. That’s the work. That’s the right effort. Remember right effort? Trying to get rid of unskillful mental qualities, trying to prevent them from arising if they haven’t arisen yet. What’s going to prevent them from arising? The sense of ease, the sense of well-being, and the vigilance that watches over it. There’s giving rise to skillful qualities that haven’t arisen yet, and maintaining and developing the ones that have. These are the skillful qualities—your alertness, your mindfulness, your discernment, concentration. Underlying all this is that sense of heedfulness, that what you’re doing is really important. As soon as you’re the least bit careless, all kinds of things can come crawling up out of the cracks in your mind. It’s not just a matter of letting go, and it’s not just putting in a lot of effort. It’s learning how to let go and keep letting go, to stay at ease, to stay open, and be very meticulous about maintaining that, being very protective of that state of mind. That’s the way in which concentration is going to let you see things as they are. See the things in the mind. See the things that have kept you bound, kept you trapped, kept you limited, and set you free from the trap.

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