Doing Nothing

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Chan Svat told a story one time of the first time he went to stay in practice with a jhanman, and his mind was all over the place. So after a couple of days, he went and asked the jhanman about this, what he could do about it. And the jhanman started out by saying, “Well, at least you know your mind is all over the place. You know what’s wandering around.” That much, he says, is part of training in mindfulness—knowing the distracted mind as a distracted mind. And what I liked about the story was the jhan Svat’s comment, which was that he realized that the jhanman was trying to give him encouragement. But he didn’t let it go to his head. He realized, “Well, his mind was distracted. It was still not what he wanted.” That’s a sign of a good meditator, someone who can take praise and yet not get carried away by it, or take an encouraging remark and not interpret it as a sign that he’s done something special. When you’re practicing mindfulness, knowing that your mind is distracted is a step better than not even realizing it at all. But it’s still not where you want to be. When the Buddha taught mindfulness, he wasn’t simply noticing whatever is arising. He taught a whole cluster of qualities—mindfulness, which is keeping something in mind; alertness, which is watching what’s going on, what you’re doing, what the results of what you’re doing are; and persistence. Persistence here, as the texts tell us, is right effort. Right effort means distinguishing what’s skillful and what’s unskillful in the mind and learning how to block or end any unskillful states in the mind, and how to give rise to skillful states and how to develop them. That’s right effort. That’s persistence in the practice. So, effort here is not just a blind effort. It’s an effort that has to involve a certain amount of insight. They talk about how the development of mindfulness, working on the foundations of mindfulness or the frames of reference, leads directly into the factors for awakening. This is how they do it. You start out with mindfulness, and then there’s a quality that they call “analysis of dhammas,” analysis of present qualities of the mind. It’s just this ability to know what’s skillful and know what’s unskillful. You see what states of mind drain your energy, what states of mind make it difficult to stay concentrated, and you try to figure out ways to get around them. In the beginning, you simply watch them coming and going, but you don’t just stay there in that fourth frame of reference. The next step is to figure out why they come, figure out why they go, so that you can use that knowledge to prevent them from arising again. As for skillful states of mind, again, you want to see why they come, why they go, so you can use that knowledge in order to maintain them. What are those qualities you want to develop? Again, mindfulness and alertness, and allow them to develop into concentration. Those factors of the mindfulness practice are mindfulness, alertness, and persistence. John Lee talks about how they blend into the factors for jhana. Mindfulness turns into directed thought, alertness turns into evaluation, and the persistence becomes singleness of preoccupation. You really stick with your object, and you learn how to stick with it skillfully so it gives rise to a sense of rapture. This is where you get energy in your practice. A sense of rapture is your food. John Fuhrman compared it to the lubricant for an engine that keeps things from drying out, or keeps the engine from seizing up. Again, this analysis of quality and quality is what enables you to figure out exactly how much pressure to put in the breath, how to breathe in a way that feels just right for all the different parts of the body. You don’t breathe in a way that satisfies one part by making another part uncomfortable. You’ve tried to figure out how to make the whole body feel nourished by the breath. It means giving equality to each part of the body. Let them all breathe in a way that feels good. After a while, they’ll start getting coordinated. When you have that sense of fullness, then the remaining factors for awakening come easily. Serenity, passati, concentration, equanimity—they build on that. The mind settles down to more and more refined levels until it’s really solid. Everything in the body is still. The mind is still. The breath seems still. It’s still because you’re full of breath energy. The oxygen coming in and out of the pores is enough to keep you going. Your main consumer of oxygen in the body is the brain. When the brain’s not moving around an awful lot, then you need less and less and less oxygen. So the breath can get more and more subtle, more and more refined, until ultimately it can stop. Not because you’re holding the breath, but simply because you don’t need to breathe. So when you’re doing mindfulness practice, this is how you do it properly. It’s not just noting or not just being mindful. You have to use it in such a way that you can develop other skillful qualities as well. There’s no place where the Buddha says one quality is going to take you all the way to awakening, or that one technique is going to take you all the way to awakening. There are steps. There are clusters of mental qualities that you have to develop. That requires that you have to be observant to see what’s lacking. When there’s too much energy, when the mind is all over the place, how can you calm it down? That’s something you have to look into. When there’s too little energy, what do you do to stir up the mind, to give it energy? The Buddha said, basically, it’s this ability to analyze what’s skillful and unskillful, and keep at developing what’s skillful until you get a sense of rapture. The rapture is the food you need in order to keep the meditation energized. When there’s too much energy, you’ve got to figure out how to calm things down. Give the mind one thing to think about and just stay with that one spot. Or you can move around the body, calm the breath energy in the different parts of the body, relax the breath energy in the different parts of the body. And the mind, it seems to be jumping around. You’ll have less and less reason to jump around. It’s like a mustard seed in a hot pan. If you turn off the heat, the mustard seed doesn’t have to jump. You can settle down. This is called Dhamma vijjāna, or the analysis of qualities. This is one of the most important ones in the factors of awakening. It helps you see what’s needed. As the Buddha said, mindfulness is needed all the time, but the other ones are needed at different parts, different points in the meditation. What you’re doing as a meditator is training your ability to recognize what’s needed at any one particular time. The Buddha sets out the basic outline in the various sets of Dhammas. At different times in your meditation, you’ll find that different sets of Dhammas speak precisely to what’s going on. But it’s important to keep in mind that there’s no single quality that’ll take you all the way. This analysis of Dhamma is this ability to see cause and effect in your mind—what gives good results, what doesn’t give good results. That’s the basis for insight. So you can’t just note, note, note, note, note what’s going on. You have to also note the connections between cause and effect and figure out what’s giving the good results and what’s not, and adjust your meditation accordingly. You have to be observant, because it’s only when you’re observant that you can bring things to a proper balance. That’s the image the Buddha gives. It’s finally bringing the mind to a sense of balance, to the point where nothing has to be done. And when the nothing has to be done, that’s when you are able to do nothing. You can parse that sentence in two ways, and both of them are helpful to think about. You’re finally able to do nothing, and there’s nothing you can do at that point. That’s when things open up. But together, to get there requires a lot of precision in figuring out when to push, when not to push, when strong effort is helpful, and when simply watching is going to be skillful. You’ve got to use your full powers of observation to get things into the right balance. you

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