Beyond Duality

September 16, 2005

Practicing concentration, here’s a process of making the mind one. You focus on a single object, and the longer you stay with it, the more the object and the mind seem to blend into one. Take the breath, for example. When you begin, it feels like you’re in one part of the body watching the breath in another part of the body. But as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, and the longer you stay with it, the more you have a sense that the breath is surrounding you, that you’re plunged in the breath. And the oneness gets even stronger when you allow your awareness to fill the whole body. The breath filling the whole body, you’ve got your awareness filling the whole body, and everything seems to be one. But in order to get to that oneness, you have to see things in pairs. Pairs of cause and effect, pairs of skillful and unskillful. You see this in the Buddhist teachings on the factors for awakening. The second factor, analysis of qualities, precedes all the concentration factors. Exactly what qualities do you analyze? The Buddha says you bring appropriate attention to the issue of what’s skillful and unskillful, as it appears in the mind. And when you’re practicing concentration, the immediate issue of skillful and unskillful is what way of focusing the mind, what objects of focusing the mind on, are conducive to getting the mind to settle down, and which ones are not. You have to be very clear about this, because otherwise you may focus on things that aren’t helpful, or focus in ways that are not helpful. Instead of bringing the mind to a state of oneness, you bring it to a state of tenness, a hundredness, a thousandness. And it all depends on what you do, where you focus, how you focus, how you bring the mind to the object, how you let it stay with the object. You’re constantly faced with choices, but it’s a very simple choice between actions that lead you to a sense of peace and well-being and actions that lead you away from a sense of peace and well-being. It doesn’t require much more analysis than that. This is why these dichotomies don’t really disturb the mind. They’re actually useful tools in getting the mind to settle down. So try to be very selective as you focus on the body. Select the parts of the body that feel good, and the beginning that may feel good only during one part of the breathing cycle. Say, while you’re breathing in or while you’re breathing out, learn how to get them good so they feel good both with the in-breath and with the out-breath. And you can maintain that sense of ease all the way through the breath cycle, and then through the next breath cycle, and then the next one. That means not only focusing on the right sensations, but also knowing how to focus on them. Because so many times when you focus on a part of the body, you tense it up and immediately ruin whatever it is you’re trying to focus on. So you have to learn how to focus in a way that keeps things relaxed, keeps things open at the point of your focus. It’s another basic dichotomy that’s useful for getting the mind to be one. Then you find that once the mind begins to settle down, the things you have to do in order to get it to settle down sometimes become unnecessary. They actually become a burden to the meditation, a burden to the concentration. As Ajahn Fung once said, “There’s one skill in getting the mind to become one, and then there’s another skill in getting it to stay there.” It’s a different kind of skill. It’s more subtle, but it requires a steadier hand. Again, the only way you’re going to learn this is by noticing what works and what doesn’t work. In other words, what does bring the mind to a sense of well-being, what keeps it to a sense of well-being, and what serves to destroy that sense of well-being. You’ve got to see these dichotomies. It’s in this way that the practice of concentration leads to the practice of insight and discernment. There’s a passage in Lumbudun where he says that once the mind gets settled down, it’s still start looking at things and contemplating things in pairs. This is precisely the Buddha’s advice. Look at things in pairs. Particularly, though, it’s not just any old pair. Pairs of cause and effect, directly related to the issue of skillful and unskillful. One of the passages where the Buddha goes through the different factors of dependent co-arising and pairs each one up with suffering or stress. In other words, mental fabrication. You contemplate mental fabrication paired up with stress to see the connection between them. See how the process of fabrication does lead to more stress. Then see what you can do to let go of or stop that process of fabrication and see what happens to stress then. You can do the same thing with consciousness, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and suffering. In other words, you learn to see these mental events just as that, as events, as actions. Then you apply that insight into skillful and unskillful in the same way. What kind of fabrication leads to more stress? What kind of fabrication leads to less stress? What happens if you can stop the fabrication entirely? The same with clinging. The same with craving. In other words, you take that basic approach of learning to see the distinction between what’s skillful and what’s not, and you apply it to events right in the mind. And not just any events, but events that have a cause and effect relationship. You begin to see how fabrication feeds stress. Or how clinging feeds stress. And then you see what you can do to starve them. There’s another passage where Sariputta’s teaching takes a similar approach. In this case, he goes down the links of dependent co-arising. He says, “Focus on the relationship between one link and the next one in the chain.” Once you get a sense of how they’re connected, then watch to see what you can do to starve the unhealthy or unpleasant connections. Again, you see the process of cause and effect, and you approach it from that question of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. It’s the same old question that brought the mind to oneness. What you’re doing is, once the mind has become one like this, you begin to see where there still are pairs operating in the mind to maintain that oneness. And whatever pairing up seems congenial, that is blatant to the mind, you focus on that one. And as the text says, that’s all there is to it. All you really need is to find one pairing that’s clear to you, that really interests you. When you gain insight into that, you’re going to gain insight into the whole chain of cause and effect as it operates in the mind. And particularly the whole issue of how ignorance gives rise to stress and suffering, and how if you replace that ignorance with knowledge, clear knowing, right here in the present moment, you can stop it. That whole process of stress and suffering is when the Buddha teaches analysis of qualities. He means it’s both as a way of getting the mind to settle down and be still, and then once it’s still, apply the same process to bring the mind to true release. It’s simply a matter of getting more and more skilled, getting more precise in detecting these differences in the mind, detecting the issue of cause and effect, and how you can manipulate the causal process to put an end to suffering. You hear a lot about how bad and limited and small-minded dualistic thinking is. That’s not what the Buddha taught. He said you can take advantage of dualities. This is the most important duality, the issue of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. You see it all over the world in everything you do. You do a job skillfully and you do it unskillfully, and the results are obvious. It’s not a matter of forcing dualistic thinking on a non-dualistic reality. The reality itself has its dualities, its dichotomies. What you’re learning how to do is to take advantage of those dichotomies. Learn to really understand them. It’s only when you understand them and learn how to master them that you can go beyond them.

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