Commit Yourself

January 15, 2006

The easy part of meditation is focusing on the breath, because it’s right here. You don’t have to go looking anywhere else. You don’t have to buy it from anybody. It’s not one of those things you have to go order from a meditation supply catalog. It comes in, goes out. It’s right here all the time. All you have to do is think about it, and there it is. The hard part is staying there, because the mind has a tendency not to hang out with things very long. It stays a little bit and then gets bored or doesn’t like what it’s focusing on and moves to something else, or else something grabs its attention and forces itself on the mind. But even then, the mind has to make the choice. It’s going to drop one thing and focus on something else, which it does very well. It keeps moving around all the time. This is one of the meanings of samsara. It’s not only the traveling around from one lifetime to the next. It’s just the habit of the mind, moving from here to there, moving from there to over there. The two processes are connected. This is what we’ve been doing for who knows how long. It’s wandering around. So the effort of the meditation lies in two ways. One is focusing on staying with the object that you’ve chosen. If mindfulness lapses, you bring it up again. Re-establish yourself on the breath. Once you’ve got it there, then you stick with it. So that your mindfulness grows, it develops. Your alertness to what’s going on gets sharper, more refined. As for unskillful things, which, at the moment that you’re meditating, means anything else that you might think about that’s not related to the breath, as soon as you catch yourself wandering off there, you drop it with no ifs, ands, or buts. As soon as you realize you’ve left the breath, come back to the breath. Then do your best not to wander off again. A lot of this depends on your ability to make the breath interesting. This is why John Lee talks so much about the different ways the breath energy flows in the body, in different areas of the body, where you can feel the breathing process. It’s not just air coming in and out the nose. It’s the energy all throughout the body. And you can make a survey. You can explore the present moment, how the process of breathing is going on. Find a spot that you like, hang out there for a while, and then see if you can make other spots in the body as comfortable as your favorite spot. That’s why you develop your mindfulness at the same time you’re helping to prevent the mind from wandering off. You give some continuity to your practice, all things in life. If you want anything good out of life, you have to learn to figure out what’s really valuable and stick with it. Don’t go running around saying, “Well, maybe that’s better over there. Maybe that’s better over there. Let’s try that. Let’s try this.” I’m a novelist. I’ve told this story before, but for those of you who haven’t heard it, it’s a good story to know. She’s a professor at a university, and every time one of her new novels comes out, she goes around to the alumni clubs and reads passages from her novels to the alumni. So she has to figure out in each novel which is a passage that’s self-contained, that you can read in about 20 minutes and make sense. In her latest novel, there’s a passage where a young woman whose mother has died—this is set in China, 18th century China—her mother has died. She’s distraught. The father promises he’s never going to marry again. He’s going to remain loyal to his wife’s memory and look after the children. But sure enough, he’s a government official, and he gets sent down south, and he comes back with a new wife, a courtesan. The girl is distraught, but the father is no fool. She sets about to try to be a good mother to the girl, so they’re playing chess. As they’re playing, the new mother is trying to teach some lessons to the girl. One of the lessons is that if you want happiness in life, you’ve got to decide there’s one thing you want more than anything else, and you’re willing to sacrifice everything else, every other pleasure, for that one thing. The girl’s half listening and half not listening. As they’re playing the game, she begins to realize that her mother seems to be a pretty sloppy chess player. She’s losing pieces all over the place. So the girl gets more aggressive, and she falls into her mother’s trap. Then the mother ends up winning the game. The lesson is in how she played the game. She was willing to lose her pawns, lose this, lose that, but she won the game. So, my friend, took that story out of the novel and read it to some alumni clubs. After two or three clubs, she decided she had to change and find another story, because nobody wanted to hear that message. We all want to hear that you can keep all your pawns and win a chess game. You can get everything that you want to have. That seems to be the American message right now. But that’s not the way it works in the practice. You’ve got to decide there’s one thing you really want more than anything else, and you’ve got to let go of everything else for that one thing. This applies not only to the meditation, but to every aspect of the practice. But you see it most clearly here. You want concentration, but you also want to think about this, think about that, contemplate this Dharma teaching, contemplate that, whatever you’ve read. It doesn’t work. You can’t hold all those things in the mind at the same time. You’ve got to drop one thing in order to pick up another. If you don’t hang on to any one thing for any length of time, nothing gets developed. The mind just sticks with its old habits of wandering around. It’s called momentary concentration. You focus on something for a little bit, and then you get bored, or you don’t like it, and you drop it. Nothing develops that way. The word for meditation is development, pavana. The only way to develop anything in the mind is to really stick with it. So you sit here looking at the breath and trying to figure out how you can stay with the breath. Start asking questions about the breath. Make yourself interested in the breath. Find something you like in the breath and stick with it. At the same time, you have to be really firm with yourself and other thoughts come up in the mind. You’re not going to go there. Once you’ve made up your mind, you have to stick with it. This is the only way your momentary concentration is going to turn into anything stronger, like what they call access concentration, when you finally do let go of other things. You’re not yet totally with the breath, but you’re getting there. Things start getting comfortable, it feels nice, and this is where you have to be careful. Once it starts feeling nice and pleasant, you start drifting, like someone who’s about to fall asleep. This is where you have to be especially careful to keep yourself interested in the breath, spreading the comfortable breath sensations to the body or allowing them to spread, at the same time letting your awareness fill the whole body. It’s only that whole body awareness that can get you through this stage of concentration. When the breath is comfortable and your range of awareness is small, it just shrinks and shrinks and shrinks, and then it’s gone. Or else you go into a state that’s called delusion concentration, which feels nice, it’s pleasant, but you don’t really quite know where you are. And when you come out of it, you’re not really sure whether you’re awake or asleep. Or there’s a nice kind of bright haze that you go into, like a fog on a sunlit day. There’s light, but it’s hazy. And again, you don’t know quite where you are, but it feels nice. That’s not right concentration. There’s no way any kind of insight can arise there. So to fight that off, you’ve either got to go through the body very systematically or you just stay in one spot and let your awareness fill the whole body and do everything you can to keep it filling the whole body. Really put all your energy into it. Don’t hold anything back. That way the mind gets into fixed penetration, where it’s really solidly with the object. There’s a sense that everything kind of locks into place. Once it’s there, all you have to do is maintain it. That’s when the maintaining starts getting easy. You’ve got a good, solid foundation. Everything has been prepared. The body’s patterns of tension get ironed out, worked out. It’s cleared out. And it becomes a nice place to stay. It’s in this way that things develop in the meditation. You’ve got to be true to your object. That means you’re not promiscuous. You don’t go hanging out a little bit here and hanging out a little bit there. You commit yourself. You commit yourself to the breath. It’s only that way that it’s going to show you its rewards. So this is one of those practices. If you want to know the truth, you have to be true. There are so many things in life that all you have to do is read a book and you think you know the truth about it. But this is one area where that doesn’t work. You know the words about the practice, but actually to know the truth of the practice, you have to be true to it. In the old days, they made a distinction between what’s called scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribe knowledge is knowledge in words. It’s what scribes knew about things. They can count things, and they can analyze things, and they can define terms, write everything up. Warrior knowledge is the knowledge that comes from doing things. You know how to do this. You know how to do that because you’ve done it. And you’ve been through all the difficulties and all of the obstacles that the mind might set up to your knowledge. But you finally win out in the end. Warrior knowledge requires that you really be true to what you’re doing. So you commit yourself to the breath. Then the breath is going to show you what it has to offer. You commit yourself to concentration. You’re going to learn what concentration can do for you, what kind of knowledge it can give rise to. Knowledge is not a matter of definitions or of calculation or commentary. So if you’re true to the breath, true to the practice, then you’re going to find out the kind of truth that the Buddha was talking about. It comes from this simple ability to, one, be patient, show some endurance to get through the difficult passages, and then just keep at it. Be true to it continually, continually, continually. That’s the only way you’re going to find anything new in life. To see what it’s like to have a mind that’s not always wandering around, learning what kind of knowledge comes from really staying in place.

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