Booster Stages

June 20, 2006

The Buddha was a master of the apt simile, the apt comparison. But even he found himself stymied when it came to finding a comparison for how quickly the mind can change. Attitudes you may have held for a long time you can drop in the fraction of a second. Intentions that you sincerely wish for, again, you can drop very quickly, and then you want to pick them up again. This is both a problem and part of the solution to the problem. The problem is that you can’t really trust your own mind. Things that you’ve warned yourself worked on for years and years you suddenly can destroy with one simple change of your mind. Then it takes years to undo the damage. The solution is that you can notice when the mind is getting destructive and you can turn it around. So this is something you have to be very careful about. This is why we meditate, why we develop mindfulness and alertness. Because it’s a lack of mindfulness and a lack of alertness that allows the mind to do things that are very destructive. So you want to strengthen these qualities as much as you can, and part of that lies in having confidence that you can do it, confidence that this is a good path to follow. At the beginning of the meditation, develop an attitude of confidence, he said, an attitude of conviction. Not only while you’re meditating, but throughout the day. Of all the people in the past who’ve found true happiness, this is how they’ve done it. Do you want true happiness? Most often, yes. A lot of times, though, you can also tell yourself, “No, I just want something right now.” Instant gratification. And there goes true happiness, cast away like a piece of trash. So try to be careful about this. Nurture this attitude of conviction, this attitude of confidence in the path and in your own ability to follow it. Because this, as the Buddha said, is what keeps you working. It’s a long path. It can be a long path. And it requires persistence, that you stick with it day in and day out. You develop this attitude of consistency in your effort. It’s also this confidence and conviction that can lead to strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your concentration. This is the kind of inner dialogue that’s actually helpful. Learning how to encourage yourself, learning how to remind yourself. You remind yourself of the rewards that come from sticking with this path. It’s not the kind of path that requires that you lie to yourself or that you disguise certain facts about yourself from yourself, that you turn a blind eye to certain parts of reality. So much of the happiness offered by the world is just that, something dependent on being blind. But the qualities that we develop in the path are not that kind of quality. Honesty, mindfulness, using your powers of observation, admitting the truth, all of which help to develop a sense of wholeness. You don’t have to put up walls of ignorance, compartmentalizing this little piece of knowledge, that little piece of belief, to make sure they don’t touch each other. The Dhamma allows you to be honest about everything. So it’s a path that’s good to follow. And this ability to have this kind of dialogue inside is what enables you to get into good states of concentration. In fact, it actually forms part of the first level of jhana. Directed thought and evaluation. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that if you find that the way you’re focusing on the body makes you anxious, irritable, uncomfortable in the present, he says, try to focus on a theme that inspires you, that gives rise to a sense of clarity and confidence in the mind. And then when that theme is done, it becomes the second jhana. So this kind of inner encouragement is an important part of the path. It’s an important part of the concentration. It keeps you with the breath, keeps you exploring the breath, learning new things about the breath energy in the body. It’s not the case that you have to wait until the end of the path to see the results. When you’re working well with the breath, you find that it is healing. It nourishes all the different organs in the body, if you learn to observe it, if you learn to use it well. It creates a sense of well-being right here. And then when that kind of thinking has done its work, then you put it aside. In John Fung’s analogy, it was a rocket. He didn’t know how he found out about this, but he knew that the rockets going to the moon required a booster rocket, which was then let go and go up in different stages until finally all you had was a little capsule that made it to the moon. It’s the same with meditation. The encouraging thought that allows you to settle down in the present then has to give way to the actual analysis of what you’re doing in the present, where your focus is right, where it’s wrong, where the breath can be adjusted where it’s best not to adjust the breath. After you’ve done that kind of work, then you let go of that voice, which allows you to be firmly planted in the breath, a sense of real oneness. So it’s important to have a good sense of what kind of inner dialogue or inner conversation is appropriate at what particular time. The ability to keep reminding yourself of the value of being on the path helps to hold at bay other negative and destructive attitudes. It allows you to do the work that gives you a place to settle down. Once you’ve got the place to settle down, then the analysis that gets you settled there can be put aside as well. You can just stay, stay, stay right here. There’ll still be a voice in the back of the mind, but it’s more a voice of maintaining what you’ve got. It is a slightly different skill. It requires a lighter touch, less conversation. Like when you’re sailing, it takes a while, and when the sails finally catch wind, then your work at the rudder is different from what it had been before they caught the wind. As the John Fohn used to say, there are three stages in what we’re doing here. One is getting the mind into concentration. The next is maintaining it. They’re related skills, but they’re separate. And then finally, you put it to use. In other words, using the concentration for gaining further insights. So try to have a sense of where you are on the path, what kind of place you’re in. What kind of policemen you need to look over the mind, to make sure that it’s not doing destructive things to itself, and that it actually is working on constructive attitudes. And then how you use those constructive attitudes to get the mind to be more strong, more firmly centered in its conviction, in its persistence, in its mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. So that this changeable mind of ours can really be trained so that it doesn’t keep destroying itself. So that it can build the path it needs until it finally gets to the point where it is no longer changeable. Because it’s only when it gets there that it can really trust itself. And it’s only when you can really trust yourself that you have any real peace, any real happiness.

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