Pulling Out of the Narratives

July 22, 2006

When you meditate, you have to be selective in what you focus on. There are all kinds of things you could focus on right now. The sound of the crickets, the distant sound of the traffic, the sound of the trees being watered. Aches and pains in different parts of your body, different kinds of thoughts coming up. There’s lots of stuff that’s coming up through your various senses. And so it’s important that you learn how to focus on things that are helpful. And as for things that are not helpful, you just let them go. This is how we solve problems in general. That quality of attention, what you attend to and what you don’t. We have to watch out for patterns of attending to things that are really not helpful. The narratives we bring, the worldviews we bring to the meditation, sometimes can really get in the way. This doesn’t concern only things outside, but it can also concern your personal history as a meditator. Things that tend to happen in the meditation. And you learn to anticipate them. And many times you lose sight of the fact that you’re the person creating those experiences, creating those patterns. And the fact of the anticipation is just one more way of bringing that old pattern back. So if you see if it’s an unhelpful pattern, you’ve got to learn how to question it. Learn to focus on things you ordinarily would not focus on. To see if that can help pull you out of your pattern, pull you out of that narrative. It’s like the story they tell of the satellite that discovered the ozone hole over the Antarctic. For years, it was bringing in the data that showed that there was an ozone hole. But the computer program had been designed to throw out any weird data, any unexpected data. And as a result, for years, the ozone hole was missed. When somebody noticed it in the data, they went back and discovered that the data had been there all these years. And it had been programmed to throw it out. In the same way, we program our minds to focus on some things and miss other things. And many times we miss important things. So if you find a particular pattern in your meditation that’s not all that helpful, say that you tend to have good sits at certain times of the day and not so good sits at other times of the day, try to question that. Ask yourself exactly how much are you contributing? To that pattern. For example, in the middle of the day, when it’s hot, most people say this is the worst meditation in the course of the day. And after a while, you begin to expect that it’s not going to be very good. And as a result, it’s not very good. So when you’re sitting in the middle of the day, any thought that comes up that reminds you of what time of day it is, just throw that thought out. Useless information. You might say, well, how can you help but not notice where the sun is? Well, don’t notice it. As soon as the mind takes note of that fact, say this is useless information, throw it out. Get back to the breath. And you find that the breath at the middle of the day is not that much different from the breath at any other time of day. You may feel sweaty. You may feel the heat. You don’t have to focus on those things. Get really focused on the breath. It’s like that music school I visited one time in Seoul, Korea, where all the musicians were sitting in one big room, everybody playing really loud, and each person really focused. They focused on what he or she was doing. And the trick, of course, was how to focus totally on what you’re doing, totally on what’s really important, and let everything else go. It’s like learning to be a performer. It’s one thing to practice on your own, but then another thing to step out on the stage, and all these other emotions suddenly come up. And you have to learn how not to pay attention to them. Just sit down and do what you’ve got to do. There have been times in other parts of your life when you’ve been able to discount useless information. You knew that you had to discount it. So when you’re meditating, learn to take that habit and put it to a useful purpose. Or if you see the energy movement in your body developing in a particular way, focus on other things. Focus on sensations that would call that energy movement, that old pattern, into question. So it doesn’t have to follow the same old pattern over and over again. It’s not that it happens on its own. You’re shaping it. So you’ve got to watch out for any decision in your mind that goes along in line with that old narrative. Create a new narrative. And it may seem artificial, but so was the old narrative. The reason it doesn’t seem artificial anymore is because you’ve been through that old narrative many, many times. It’s like watching Casablanca over and over and over, month after month after month, on the movie channel. After a while, you forget that there were decisions that were made to make the movie this way. It could have come out many different ways. It didn’t have to be the way it was. But you watch it many times, and it acquires an inevitability. So remind yourself, these things are not inevitable. Or the pattern of the mind being still for a while and then suddenly refusing to be still. That can happen a couple of times, but it’s not necessarily a pattern that has to repeat. In other words, you don’t have to believe the old patterns. Learn to question them. People who have been able to dig their way out of depression find that the two most useful questions are the thing that you believe to be true. Does it really have to be true? Is it really true? Learn to put a question mark next to it. The second question is, what if the opposite were true? Learn to apply those same questions to bad patterns in your meditation. Learn to deprogram yourself. I found it interesting when I was reading about those two questions that those are the questions that you ask. As soon as an insight comes up, he says, “Learn to turn it around and ask, what if the opposite were true?” Then you find that in this vast field of sensations, there are potential sensations that could actually fall in line with the opposite narrative. So you follow those for a while and see where they lead. This way, your insight has two eyes, not just one. You gain a greater sense of freedom, a greater sense of control. You don’t have to follow your old anticipated patterns. You don’t have to go through the same narrative again and again and again. You can create new movies in the mind. In the beginning, it may seem difficult, but it’s worth the effort to get you out of these unskillful ruts. This is one of the purposes of meditation. It’s to remind you that there are more things possible than you might have imagined, even in as simple things like the way your breath goes or the way your concentration goes. Learn to open your mind to new opportunities, new possibilities. Always keep an eye out for the possibility that you’re shaping your experience more than you might realize. Fiction writers find this happening all the time. They set up a group of characters in their heads, and the characters are totally invented by the writers. You follow them through, and then occasionally you find a character doing something totally unexpected. It’s as if the character had a life of its own. That’s simply because you lose sight of the fact that you are creating the story on some deeper levels, in addition to the conscious level. The same happens in meditation. We have some subconscious expectations, subconscious anticipations, and they really do shape the way things go. It doesn’t matter how inevitable the narrative is. It is something that is constructed. It is put together by causes, and the causes could be put together in other ways. You have that freedom. So try to develop the mindfulness and the alertness and the discernment that allows you to take advantage of that potential freedom. The things you fear don’t have to happen. Or the old comfortable narratives, which are comfortable like old shoes. They don’t look particularly good, and they may not be particularly in good shape anymore, but they’re comfortable. So you go for them again and again and again. Try to see if you can put things together. Break things down into smaller pieces and put them together in a new way. This is why the Buddha has you analyze things in terms of aggregates, sense media, and properties. Break things down into small units and see what other things can be created out of them. A lot of the discernment lies in the aggregates. It’s right there, particularly the kind of discernment that leads to release. Release is going to be something unexpected. It’s outside of our normal patterns of thinking. So a useful lesson in meditation is to remind yourself that there is more in this world than is dreamed of in your philosophy. That old line from Shakespeare. There are more possibilities in your mind than are dreamed of in your narratives. So try to deconstruct the narrative and see what’s left. See what other narratives, other ways of understanding the mind, are more useful and productive.

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