Keep It Simple

September 14, 2006

What we’re doing here is pretty simple, and it’s important that we keep it simple. The mind has a tendency to make things too complex, to spin all kinds of elaborations about what it wants out of the meditation, where the meditation used to be a few days ago and where it is now, all kinds of stories, all kinds of mental proliferation. None of that is really part of the path. The path is something simple, eight factors. Sitting here quietly, you’ve got right speech, right action, right livelihood under control. And the other five factors all work together, particularly the factors for right concentration. Start out with right effort. Look at the mind. See what’s skillful in the mind, what’s not skillful. We know that mindfulness and alertness are skillful, so you stick with them. Try to be alert to the breath and keep remembering to stay alert to the breath. For the time being, any other thought that comes along not related to the breath can be dropped as an unskillful thought. So you’re staying with the breath, mindful, alert. That’s right effort right there, and it shades into right mindfulness, just being with the breath in and of itself. So you’ve got three qualities now, mindful, alert, and ardent. Ardency is part of right effort as applied to the mindfulness practice. That’s it. Just remember to stay with the breath, be alert to the breath, and allow the breath to be comfortable. That’s when alertness moves into evaluation. One of the factors of jhana. The more consistently you stay with the breath, your mindfulness develops into directed thought, and you really stay right with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. When the ardency turns into singleness of preoccupation, you really are staying right here. Now we’ve got all the causal factors for right concentration, the first level of jhana. The results are a sense of ease and a sense of rapture. That’s all you’ve got to figure out. So try to keep it basic. Try to keep it spare. Because elaborations tend to get in the way. We think by elaborating on it, we’re figuring things out in advance, but we’re not. We’re just cluttering up the landscape, mucking up the works. As for how long it’s going to take to get results, just don’t think about it. That’s in anticipation. It’s a typical function of the mind, but something you don’t need right now. So when you notice that kind of thinking taking over, let it drop. As long as you keep it simple, it stays a lot easier. I mean, it’s hard enough. It’s hard enough to maintain this kind of focus, but all the elaboration doesn’t help. You want to keep things basic, simple. That way you maintain your focus, which is what it’s all about—getting the mind to be solid, focused on one activity over and over and over again, thinking about the breath, being aware of the breath, reminding yourself not to leave the breath. It’s a cluster of activities, but it’s focused in one direction. As you get it more precisely focused in, then you can drop some of the extra activities. When the breath feels comfortable coming in, going out, think of spreading that sense of body. When you can maintain that sense of full body awareness as you breathe in, as you breathe out, there’ll come a point where you don’t have to evaluate things anymore. You can improve on the breath, and you’ll see that the evaluation is actually getting in the way of settling down. So what you do is you simplify things. You drop the evaluation. Just stay with the sensation of the breath. This is a lot of what the practice is, making it more and more simple as you go along, figuring out where your efforts are superfluous, where they’re unnecessary, and letting them drop. And you’re applying the Four Noble Truths as you do that. Wherever there’s any stress that you notice is unnecessary, you just stop it. Stop the cause. Abandon the cause. In other words, stop doing whatever it is that’s causing the stress. So, as we’re meditating, we’re just progressively making ourselves less and less burdened. The trick lies in being consistent. This is why restraint of the senses is such an important foundation for the practice. The more consistently you keep your watch over the mind to make sure it doesn’t go off in unskillful directions in the course of the day, the easier it’s going to be when you sit down to meditate. In some of the texts, the Buddha talks about step-by-step practice, with restraint of the senses coming before meditation practice. But it’s best to see all the different parts of the practice at hand. In other words, if you don’t get any sense of ease or peace with the meditation, it’s harder to maintain control over your senses. The nature of the mind is that it’s looking for happiness. If it doesn’t find happiness in the meditation, it’s going to go sneaking out and trying to find it someplace else. So, restraint of the senses helps your meditation. Your meditation helps the restraint of the senses. This applies to all the different factors of the path. When the mind is at peace, it’s easier to stick with the precepts. All the factors of the path shade into one another. When the Buddha’s setting them out, it’s nice and linear. But the actual practice requires that you work on all the different factors consistently. It sounds like you’ve got a lot of little chickens to look after, but it’s not really the case. Just try to keep being mindful of how things are going in the mind, what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. Remember to keep that issue in mind as you practice, as you go through the day. That simplifies a lot of things. It’s one major focus. What the mind is doing right now. And then when you sense anything unskillful, you let it go. When you sense anything skillful, you encourage it, you maintain it. This is why the Buddha said that right view, right mindfulness, and right effort are the three most essential factors to get everything together so you can reach what’s called the heart of the path. Which is right concentration. Again, as I said, it sounds like a lot of chickens to watch out for. A lot of little baby chicks you’ve got to keep under control. But it’s really not the case. Just stay right here. Just make yourself very sensitive right here to any stress that you may be causing, whether it seems to be necessary or not. And when you see that it’s unnecessary, you drop it. That’s how the meditation becomes a skill. You stay focused on the real issues. This is why it’s so important to understand what mindfulness is, just keeping all this in mind. Sometimes you hear mindfulness described as being totally aware of the present moment, being choiceless in your awareness. Well, choiceless awareness is fine. There are no problems. You’re free to note anything you want. Anything you like, be aware of it. Be all-embracing in awareness, no judgment, nothing at all. The problem is, there is a problem. There is suffering. And when there’s a problem, you want to know where to focus your attention so you can most effectively deal with the problem. So the Buddha points out the pattern. There is suffering, but there’s a cause to suffering. It’s in the mind. And the way to uproot the cause is to work on developing the factors of the path. So that’s what we’re doing right now. There is a larger framework to what we’re doing. As long as you understand the framework, then you can focus in on what needs to be done. That simplifies things a lot. You don’t have to be aware of the infinity of the present moment. Just be aware of what the mind is doing right now, what choices it’s making. Be more alert, be more mindful, and particularly be alert to the issue of where there’s any unnecessary stress. Once you’ve got that focus and you keep it simple, the practice goes a lot more smoothly.

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