Circumspection

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One of the most striking things about the Buddhist teachings is how little he deals in abstractions, and how much he focuses on particulars and techniques and strategies. Instead of talking about the wonders of oneness, the wonders of emptiness, and nirvana, he talks about what you do to get there, to get to nirvana, to get to true happiness. He focuses on very particular things so that you don’t attack the problem of suffering straight on. You look for its causes. That’s strategic thinking. And sometimes even his way of attacking the causes is a little indirect. The cause, he says, is craving. So what does he have you do? You don’t look at craving. You look at your breath. Or you look at the body, one way or another. And the course is staying focused there. You begin to see a lot of things. In other words, we focus on the breath, not because we’re trying to get the breath or turn into expert breathers. That’s a means. That’s a way there to what we really want. So learn to focus on the particulars. Be very observant of the little things, because the little things make a big difference. So right now, when you’re focusing on the breath, how long can you stay with the breath? How does the mind allow itself to wander off from the breath? Try to catch it in the act. And then do what you can to make the breath more interesting. Because that tendency to get distracted is one of the big problems that we’re going to have to deal with. That goes deep. Because you’ll notice that it often happens. You’re with a breath, and then a few minutes later you realize you haven’t been with a breath for quite a while. Something happened. There was a blanking out. That blanking out right there, that’s the big problem. Buddha called it ignorance. This element of not knowing. How does it happen? How can it be that you’re thoroughly aware of the breath one moment and a moment later, it’s all blanked out, it’s all gone? This is what happens with this process of becoming. We create these little worlds in the mind, but in order to create them, there has to be an element of blanking out, an element of part of the mind lost. It’s like when you go to a play, a traditional play, where between the scenes they will lower the curtain, and then the curtain rises up, and you’re in a totally different place. Before, you were in a drawing room, and now you’re out in the outside world. They do that because they have to change the scenery, and they don’t want you to see the changing of the scenery. They don’t want you to see the illusion. So you’re presented with a totally new scene, out of nowhere, out of nothing. And it’s more believable because the curtain was down for a while. It’s the same with the mind. The curtain goes down, and there’s a certain willing of the curtain to go down. This is where the mind plays tricks on itself. It’s this trickiness of the mind that we’re going to have to learn how to understand. If we’re going to get anywhere in our meditation, why is it that even though we know better, we do things that we know are going to harm us? There’s that moment of ignorance when we allow ourselves to forget. So we’re going to catch the mind in action, this allowing, this willing of ignorance. Again, as with everything else in the Buddha’s range of techniques, it’s an indirect approach. The first thing you do is try to develop a particular skill in whatever technique you’ve chosen. If you’re going to stay with the breath, be really skillful about staying with the breath. Try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. How it feels when you breathe in, how it feels when you breathe out. What ways of breathing feel better than others? What ways of focusing your mind allow you to stay with the breath? Stay with the breath longer. If you stay focused on one spot, it’s very easy for when the breath gets very subtle for the mind to lose its focus, and then you start drifting off. This is basically how we go to sleep. It’s an old habit. We allow things to let go, let go, let go. We relax, and then we’re gone into a dream world. That’s becoming in action, birth in action, as we wander off into the dream. So, because the mind is so used to falling asleep when it’s relaxed, we have to be extra vigilant as the mind gets comfortable with the breath. The breath feels good in the different parts of the body. You have to spread your awareness from that one spot. So it’s a large, full-body awareness. One way of doing this is going through the body, section by section. Another is to start out by trying to maintain two spots at the same time, say one up in the head and the other one down at the base of the head. The activity of being focused on two spots at once helps keep you awake. It’s almost as if you had two hands. Then you find that you can focus on one spot with one hand, and the other hand is free to grab other things. So, give yourself two spots, so both hands are full. Then think of the line connecting the top of the head and the base of the spine. Be aware of how that line connects. How the breath energy feels there. Then from that line, expand your awareness out to fill the whole body. Do what you can to maintain this full-body awareness. Every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out, think “whole body, whole body,” so you don’t forget. This way you develop your mindfulness, you develop your alertness, and you’re developing another quality as well—circumspection. Your ability to see all around. Because it’s this all-around seeing, this circumspection, that allows you to see the things that you’re really here to see. After all, it’s the mind focusing on one little thing to the exclusion of other things. That plays a big part in ignorance. It’s how the mind fools itself. You get your attention focused on one thing, and then things shift in your blind spot. Then you turn and look out, and something’s changed. It’s a whole different place. So we focus on the breath not only to see the breath, but to see around, to see what the mind is doing in relationship with the breath. This quality of circumspection is what allows you to see through your mind. It’s your own willed ignorance to see through these tricks that the mind plays on itself. Because it is easy, after all, when you’re getting good at a particular technique, for pride to develop around that, to think that the technique is going to do everything. It’s called silapata paramassa. It’s called clinging to precepts and practices. We tend to think of it as dealing with rituals, but that’s not the only meaning here. After all, we do have precepts in the path. We do have practices—the practice of mindfulness, the practice of concentration. And it’s the idea that simply mastering the practice is going to be enough for awakening. That’s a major fetter. It’s one of the first fetters we have to let go of. And the first level of awakening is what allows us to see through that. How does it do that? As I said, the mind engages in becoming. When you’re practicing mindfulness, there’s a level of becoming right there. When you’re practicing concentration, there’s a level of becoming right there. You create this world out of the raw material, your physical sensations. And it is very difficult. It involves blocking out certain things. But you work on it. You master this, because it’s in the stillness of concentration that you begin to see around it. And your eyesight widens to include more and more of this blind spot behind you. Eventually, you see the light. You see the little “I” in there, the little “me” in there that’s doing all this. In the beginning, it’s an uncertain “me” because the practice is hard, and you find yourself slipping off, slipping off. But after a while, as you get more and more used to it, more and more accomplished, there’s that sense of accomplishment that comes with it. “Hey, I can do this. Let’s see how well I can do this.” And it’s important that you allow that to function, the desire to do it really skillfully, to really master this. Because what happens as the alternative is that old idea of, well, you just simply let go of everything all at once and there you are, the quick fix, the impatient fix. But you learn to put that attitude aside and say, “No, this is something I really have to work hard on, work persistently with.” But it’s not all hard work. After all, there is a sense of pleasure you’re working with here, and you get better and better at it. The pleasure gets more and more refined, more subtle, more continuous. That’s an important thing that you’ve got to work on. But, as the Buddha points out in one of his suttas, you can still create a very subtle sense of pride around your accomplishment. He says that’s the difference between a true person and an untrue person. I’ve said many times before that the Buddha asks one quality in his students. He says, “Bring me a person who’s honest and no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” Because it’s our own ability to deceive not only others, but ourselves. That’s the big issue in the practice. And it’s your willingness to see through your own self-deceit that’s going to make all the difference. This is what your self-deceit is. It’s building this little sense of self, hiding behind the concentration, saying, “I’m pretty good here. I’m better than those other people who don’t have my level of attainment.” You’ve got to see that in action and realize that you don’t want to create even that. So it’s not just mastering the technique. Once the technique is mastered, keep at it, look around until you see the blind spots that are still there in the mind. Even when you’ve developed really great mindfulness, really great concentration, there can still be these blind spots. Your mind’s habit of tricking itself, hiding. So again, the circumspection is what allows you to see around, until you finally see the trickiness of the mind. And you can let it go. You can just drop it and realize that so much of your life has been spent with the mind playing tricks on itself. This is why awakening is a chastening experience. If it were simply a matter of having mastered a technique, there would still be a kind of pride that would go along with it. But mastering the technique is only the foundation for the insight that allows you to see the mind’s own self-deceptions, its willed ignorance, the tricks it’s been playing on itself, looking for quick and dirty ways of getting happy, and developing the maturity to drop that. So it’s not just a mastering of technique, it’s a mastering of integrity, the unwillingness to keep up. So the technique is necessary. It’s part of the strategy. But again, it is not the end in and of itself. You have to use the technique, staying with the breath, staying with the body, to look around. So that you catch the mind in the act of lying to itself, hiding things from itself, and you can grow up. As I said, this is why awakening is a chastening experience. Because you realize the mind’s deceits, its willingness to do things even though it knows better. So seeing that insight, insight doesn’t come with a moment of pride, it comes with a moment of feeling chastised and growing up. So try to work on this quality of circumspection, being very, very observant as you master the technique. Because the powers of observation not only allow you to master the technique, to get more and more skilled at it, but also to see it through these curtains that you’ve placed in the mind. And seeing through the curtains, that’s one of the ways that you unfetter the mind and make it free.

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