Strategic Wisdom

July 20, 2007

Close your eyes. Stay focused on the breath. Focus on the feeling of the breath anywhere at all in the body, any spot where it’s convenient, where the sensation of the breath is clear, that lets you know now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Try to stay there. Keep it up. This is the difficult part of the meditation. It’s the maintaining. Because the mind is like a committee, and not just an ordinary committee. It’s like the Chicago City Council. Different members have different agendas. You don’t know whose interests they’re representing, and they don’t want you to know whose interests they’re representing. What the meditation does, what concentration does, is bring some clarity to the mind. Because it’s only when the mind is still able to stay with one object for long periods of time can it really see things clearly. There are members of the committee, members of the city council, that don’t like this. Some of them are the aging hippie surfers who just want to have fun. They’re looking for entertainment. Then there are the other ones whose motivations may be a little bit more devious. Things they don’t want to have come to the surface. So you’ve got to do your best to bring everybody on board. This is why meditation is not just a matter of technique, but it’s also a matter of attitude, appreciating the good that comes from being clear inside. It’s good not just in a goody-two-shoes sense. It’s more good in the sense of a genuine happiness. This is one thing that every member of the committee can agree on, that we all want happiness. Every desire in the mind is a desire for happiness, a desire for pleasure, a desire for well-being. The thing is that some of those desires are ill-informed, and some of them are well-informed. But as long as you’re clear that this is all for the sake of true happiness, you’ve got common ground. So learn to have some respect for that common ground. We want a happiness that doesn’t turn into something else, that doesn’t turn on us. So when one member of the committee voices objections, either during the meditation or afterwards, you’ve got to be able to reason with those voices. Point out that this really is for your best interest. Be able to get the mind to settle down and be still. Think about all the times in the past that you had wrongheaded notions of happiness that got you into trouble. Ask yourself, “Do you want to go through that again?” Why did you give in to those wrongheaded notions? Partly because you didn’t know better. Sometimes, even when you did know better, you weren’t mindful, you weren’t alert. You lied to yourself and suddenly found yourself going in that direction, and you ended up suffering. So ask yourself, “Do you want to go through that again?” There are ways not to repeat your old mistakes, one of which is to recognize your old mistakes as mistakes. And then, secondly, is to fortify the mind in such a way that it doesn’t make those mistakes again. This is precisely what mindfulness, alertness, all the qualities that lead to concentration, and then, of course, the concentration itself, this is what they provide. You should keep a thorough watch on the mind. See when its desires are getting out of line, when its desires are actually counterproductive. Now, again, as I said, there are some members of the committee that don’t want that. They don’t want to be seen for what they are. But if you can remind them that they’re here for the sake of happiness, wouldn’t you want a happiness that’s really true, a happiness that’s lasting? Do whatever you can to reinforce that reason with them. The Buddha has an interesting test for wisdom. He said it’s your ability, once you see that there’s something you’d like to do but it’s going to give bad results, your ability to talk yourself into not doing it. In other words, wisdom just doesn’t know cause and effect, but it also knows how to manipulate cause and effect in the mind. It’s strategic. It understands how to get yourself to abandon things you like but give bad results. It’s also strategic in the sense that there are things that you don’t like to do but are going to give good results. Your wisdom, your discernment, lies in your ability to talk yourself into doing it. Again, it’s strategic. Whatever little tricks you may need in order to get the mind to abandon its unskillful habits and to develop skillful ones, little rewards you can promise yourself for doing the right thing, sometimes little punishments for doing the wrong thing, and your ability to keep a good humor about the whole thing. Don’t be grim and puritanical about it. Remind yourself, “We’re here for the sake of happiness.” Jon Swett talked often about the right attitudes to bring to the concentration practice. The first is respect, realizing this is an important skill that you’ve got to develop, something that’s been handed down for centuries by people who knew what they were doing. In the opportunity you have to practice concentration, this is a valuable opportunity. So you bring respect. Then you also have a quality of what’s called passada, which can be translated as clarity, confidence, and essentially the mind’s good mood about the whole thing. You’re happy that you’ve got this opportunity. This combination of respect and joy in the practice makes it a lot easier. It can seem tedious sometimes. Just bring the mind back to the breath, back to the breath, back to the breath. If it’s been wandering off, you’ve got to bring it back to the breath again. You’ve got to be stubborn and staying with the breath once you’ve got your awareness there. No matter what other reasons you may have for wanting to wander off, you’ve got to say, “No, no, no, no, no.” Learn to say “no” with a smile, but stick with your “no.” When I came back from Thailand, I began setting up the monastery. My older brother, who’s a professor of business administration, had lots of ideas for how we could get the monastery going. I knew that they were all business ideas, but they were not going to work in the monastery paradigm. After giving me his ideas for several minutes, he turned to me and said, “You know, you’re pulling this Thai trick on me. You’re smiling, which means that you don’t accept what I’m saying.” I said, “Yes, that’s right.” But it’s an effective trick. If you argue with people who are giving you advice you don’t want, you just make things worse. You smile. It makes it a lot easier when you say “no” with a smile than when you say “no” with a frown. So learn how to deal with the committee members that way. In other words, keep the lines of communication open, but at the same time, you’ve got to be firm. No, we’re not going there. We’re not going to remember what happened yesterday or the day before. We’re not going to make plans for next week’s job. We’re going to stay right here. Of course, you can learn how to use the breath to help maintain that sense of a good mood. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing to the body. It feels good to stay here, and then it feels good to try to maintain that. It’s a sense of fullness and rapture that you can develop with the breath. That’s the lubrication that keeps the meditation going. Without that lubricant, things dry up, they seize up, and they stop. It’s somewhat immediate proof to the pleasure-seeking parts of the mind that this is a good thing. It’s just that ability to breathe in a way that feels really good, really gratifying, down inside. Ask yourself, “What kind of breath would feel gratifying right now?” Allow the body to breathe in that way. Learn to strategize. That’s an important part of your meditation. That’s where the discernment comes in. In getting the mind to settle down, it’s not that the discernment comes in once only after the mind really is still. The process of getting the mind to settle down does require some wisdom. It requires some discernment. It requires your using your intelligence and your ingenuity. That kind of concentration has discernment built into it. You’re already learning some important lessons in cause and effect, and some lessons in the paradoxes of stress, and some lessons in your strategy. There are aspects to wisdom that you might not have expected, but when you find that they work, it’s still Dharma. It’s no less Dharma for the fact that you thought it up and discovered it and used it and got results. Even if it’s not in the texts, the fact that it actually does lead to lasting happiness, that means it’s Dharma. The Buddha gave a set of criteria for deciding what is Dharma and what’s not Dharma. He didn’t say you had to have proof that the Buddha himself actually said it, but you look instead at the results it leads to. Does it help do away with passion? Does it help do away with being fettered? Does it make you less of a burden, both for yourself and the people around you? These are the sorts of things that determine what’s Dharma and what’s not. So if you find that it liberates the mind from its unskillful agendas, it’s Dharma. Then you’ve found some Dharma. And that’s something worthy of respect. So have some respect for this practice. Have some respect for the goal of putting an end to suffering for finding true happiness. Because there’s so much out in the world that’s cynical and sarcastic, and we tend to pick up a lot of those attitudes. The idea that there’s really nothing good in life, that there’s really nobody you can trust at all. And on the one hand, that may seem to protect us, but on the other hand, it also defeats us. It’s better to have respect and confidence in the idea that there was somebody who found an end to suffering and he taught it freely. And people have been getting good results for the past 2,600 years. Trust in that fact is what opens the door, keeps the door open, for your own ability to put an end to suffering, too.

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