Pushing the Three Characteristics

September 11, 2007

We usually hear these pretty early on when we learn of the Buddhist teachings, and they are important themes in the teachings. But then here we are, sitting and meditating, trying to get a state of constant concentration, a sense of ease, pleasure, bliss, even, in the concentration, and get the mind under our control, get the results of our concentration under our control. In a way, we’re pushing against the three themes of what are often called the three characteristics. It’s important that we do this. The Buddha didn’t ask you simply to accept what he had to say. He says, “Test it.” One good way of testing the principle of inconstancy is to try to make your mind as constant as possible. A good way of testing the principle of stress is to see how much ease you can get as you focus the mind. Another way of testing the principle of not-self is to see how much control you can have. Many times, again and again, the Buddha brings up the issue of control as the central part of self. If something is really yours, you have control over it. He never said that the five aggregates are totally stressful, totally inconstant, totally out of control. As he once pointed out, if there were no pleasure to be found in the aggregates, we wouldn’t be attached to them, we wouldn’t cling to them. There is some pleasure here, but there are different kinds of pleasure. What he wants us to do is to drop some of the sensual pleasure that we try to find in the aggregates and develop a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure that comes from getting the mind into the level of form, i.e., the form of the body while we’re sitting here. How much pleasure can you have by inhabiting your whole body? You allow the breath to come in and go out in a comfortable way. That pleasure forms the nourishment for the path. Without that pleasure, the path would run out of gas. Things would dry up. Jon Fung once mentioned the principle of the rapture that comes from good concentration. He said there’s a lubricant that keeps the motor from seizing up. So we’re pushing against the three characteristics. Of course, they’re going to push back, and we have to be prepared for that and learn from it to find a good way out. Exactly where are the limitations? How far can concentration take you? And particularly, how far can you take the concentration? Because you’ll find some days that it goes smoothly and no problem at all, and other days it seems like it’s totally out of whack, that you wonder even if you have ever been a meditator. It has its ups and downs like this. The important thing is that you try to make your input in the present moment as constant as possible. There’s another lesson we learn by training the mind in this way, giving it a task to do consistently. You begin to see that sometimes not everything is determined by what you’re doing in the present moment. Sometimes there are things coming in from the past. Anyone who’s had several children will notice this principle immediately. You raise the kids the same way, but they turn out differently. It makes you stop and think, “Well, maybe each kid comes in with a different load of past karma. They’re coming from different directions.” And the same principle applies with your own mind. At different days, different periods of time, even within one meditation setting, you find that past karma of different kinds will come up. Instead of focusing on the breath, for one five-minute period we’ll get results, and for the next five-minute period it doesn’t seem to get any results. But you’re doing the same thing. That’s the other lesson you’re learning, the principle of past karma having some influence. When you find that your meditation has these ups and downs, you have to be very careful. Once you’ve tested to make sure that what you’re doing in the present moment is as skillful as you know, then try to keep on doing the skillful thing and not let yourself get discouraged by the sloughs and not get careless during the high periods. Try to keep your practice on an even keel. Only by continuing to put good input into the present moment will you have a chance to have some good past karma to rely on. If you let your present mood depend on the results of your meditation, you’re setting yourself up for problems. In other words, suppose you have a stretch of old past karma that’s not particularly good showing itself, and you let yourself get discouraged by that. That sets you into a tailspin. If you’re riding along on a really nice period and you start getting lazy and complacent, that’s unskillful karma as well. You always want to make sure that no matter how bad the situation is outside, you always want to have a skillful approach into the present moment. Add as much skillful energy, as much skillful attention as you can. In other words, you have to try to be as constant as you can. Even though the results may be inconstant, don’t let your efforts depend on their inconstancy. Try to find your own inner resources. What can you call on inside yourself to encourage yourself, to energize your practice, even through the bad periods, the periods when things don’t seem to make any sense? Just stay with your sense of awareness. Try to be as still as possible and just watch. That way you don’t pick up the diseases that come, or the germs that come. The germs that come from, say, a bad session of meditation or the germs that can come from a good session. One of Ajahn Fueng’s students once complained, “Why is it that yesterday my meditation was so good, I thought it would never change into anything bad? And today it’s like I never meditated ever before.” He said, “Well, the mind is like the body. You wear different sets of clothes.” From one day to the next. Just watch that. Remember, you’re separate from the clothes. The results are one thing, but the observer is something else. The part of the mind that’s deciding what to do next, that’s something else as well. Keep them separate. Learn to find some source within yourself for that deep kind of well. There are wells in the world whose output doesn’t depend on the amount of rainfall that comes. They go very deep. There’s one theory that the water actually comes from the earthquake faults. It doesn’t come from the rain; it comes from a chemical reaction down in the faults, which is constant. You can draw on these wells during the dry period of meditation. It rains during the wet periods, and their output is constant. Try to develop the kind of attitude towards the meditation that allows you to keep drawing on that deep well. So whether the results are going through a drought or they’re going through a flood, you can develop consistency in your meditation. As you do that, you start learning a lot of important lessons. Remember, we’re not here just to enjoy the meditation. We’re here to learn from it. One of the things we’re going to learn is exactly how constant can you make the mind. How much pleasure can you get out of these aggregates? How much control do you have over them? So don’t be surprised when they push back, because you’re pushing them. Be willing to learn what lessons they have to teach. you

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2007/070911%20Pushing%20the%20Three%20Characteristics.mp3>