Whatever It Takes

November 15, 2007

Even here in our quiet corner, it’s not always quiet. So it’s good to learn how to deal with noise. I’ve always liked a John Chah statement that “noise” during your meditation. It’s not the case that the noise is disturbing you. You’re disturbing the noise, if you comment on it, if you complain about it to yourself, weaving all kinds of dialogues and narratives about how that noise should not be happening. So the meaning of his comment is that you leave the noise alone. If it’s going to be there, it’s going to be there. And you allow it just to pass away, because that’s what noise does. It comes and it goes. Just make sure that your mind doesn’t put up a resistant surface to it. Think of your body and your mind as a big, wide-open window, like a screen on a window. The wind can blow through the screen. The image in the Canon is actually of a net. The net doesn’t catch the sounds, just like it doesn’t catch the wind. Think of your mind as not catching these things. It goes past. But you can be still in the midst of that. Years ago, I was teaching a meditation session in Swarthmore. They put us in a room which had an extremely loud clock. At the end of the first session, as soon as everyone opened their eyes, their first comment was, “That clock!” So I had to point out to them that the clock hadn’t destroyed their breath. The breath was still there. So it’s simply a matter of learning how to stay focused on one thing in the midst of all the other stuff that’s going on around you. That’s the art of concentration. And the Pali says, “Secluded from sensuality.” It doesn’t mean secluded from sense impressions, that you don’t hear them and you don’t have any sense impressions at all. Sensuality here means, as the Buddha defines it in another passage, your passion for your resolves for sensual pleasures. In other words, we like having intentions, we like talking about sensual stuff to ourselves. You have to learn how to drop that passion, and that’s when you are secluded from sensuality, when you reflect on how impermanent sensual pleasures are and how untrustworthy they are. So, for the time being, at least you decide to drop any involvement with them. That’s the kind of seclusion the Buddha is talking about. Now, there may still be sense impressions. And you hear them very clearly. But the trick in concentration is learning how not to get involved, just letting them pass while you maintain contact with your object, with the breath. This is how you can maintain concentration in different situations. So that you don’t have to have just the ideal situation in order to practice. After all, this is an ability that we’ve developed to some extent in our lives. You’re watching a TV show. Other things are happening while you’re watching the TV show. But if you’re really absorbed in the show, you just stay with the show, and other stuff just goes right past you. So try to develop the same level of absorption and interest in the breath, reminding yourself there’s a lot to learn here, and just keeping tabs on the breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. I happened to visit a music school in Seoul. The year prior to that, a friend of mine had learned that Khayagam needed a little drummer. So she taught me how to play the Korean drum in order to accompany her. When I stopped off in Korea on the way back to Thailand, she had gone back to continue her studies in Korean music. She invited me to visit her teacher. The music school there consisted of one large room with about forty people practicing their instruments or practicing their singing. It wasn’t like a music school here in the States, where each musician has his or her own little room. Everybody was in that one room. As you were performing or as you were listening to your teacher, you had to stay totally focused on what you were doing, what you were listening to, and learn how to block out everything else. Even though you could hear it, you decided not to focus on it. That’s the kind of concentration you’re trying to develop. In the beginning, it is easier when you don’t have those distractions. But a concentration that relies on ideal circumstances is not a very reliable refuge in any way at all. For the most part, though, things are quiet here. It’s good to learn how to keep focused, even when things are not quiet. Even when there is activity. This involves learning how to accept situations and regard them as challenges. You could call this quality humility. Humility doesn’t mean that you say that you’re a bad person or that you’re unworthy or anything like that. It simply means recognizing that as long as you’re suffering, you still have a lot to learn, and so you want to learn. That desire to learn is what’s going to carry you through, and you’re willing to do what it takes. You don’t set up little laws inside yourself, saying, “I’m only going to learn this kind of thing, or there are certain things that are beneath me, or certain things that I’m just going to say are too much for me to do.” That’s the kind of pride that gets in the way of your meditation, gets in the way of things developing. Sometimes, lessons in cleaning up the monastery are good meditation lessons. There was a lot of my training with the Jon Fueh, learning how to mop a floor, learning how to clean a spittoon, learning how to be observant of these things without having to be told all the time when to sweep, when not to sweep, looking at the wind to decide whether today is a good day to sweep or not. All these little things are part of training the mind. You can find imperfections in the environment here. How can anyone be expected to meditate when things are like this or like that? That, again, is a kind of pride that gets in the way of your meditation. If I want my concentration to be really good, I have to learn how to stay concentrated in the midst of whatever the situation. So here’s an opportunity to learn that skill, to develop that skill. If you find yourself not doing well with it, just remind yourself that the only way you grow is by learning how to deal with the things for which you’re not talented, that don’t come easily. I was talking to a man who was training in martial arts this past weekend. He was commenting that there are a lot of people out there who are good at certain skills, but they have huge gaps in their repertoire as martial artists, and they have too much pride to go back and learn how to fill in those gaps. It’s a common trait among all of us. We like to do the things that we’re comfortable doing, that we feel skilled at doing, where things come fluently. When something’s awkward, we don’t like to do it, whether it’s a matter of wounded pride or whatever. And yet, if you want to be really good at a total range of your skills, you have to learn how to do things that you’re not good at. Be willing to repeat it a hundred times with an awareness that maybe for those first hundred times it’s not going to come well yet at all. But you’ve got to keep doing it again and again, because if you don’t do it, it’s never going to get developed, never going to be mastered. So, on the one hand, there’s the humility that admits that this is a skill you’ve got to learn, combined with the esteem or self-esteem that says, “Well, yes, I can do this if I really apply myself to it.” In other words, the ability to talk yourself into sticking with things and having the confidence that with enough time and enough observation you’re going to learn how to do it well, or at least do it better than you’ve done it before. So again, humility doesn’t mean a low self-esteem. It means looking at the situation realistically. As long as you’re suffering, there’s work to be done. And you want to be willing to do whatever it takes.

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