Wise Work

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One of the Pali terms for meditation is gamatana, which means your occupation, your work, your area of responsibility. We don’t like thinking of the meditation as work, but we do have to do work on our minds. Unfortunately, it’s not all effort. Or, to put it another way, the effort is amply rewarded. And even before you get to the end of the path, the effort that’s put into getting the mind to be still, to let down its burdens, to stay steadily with one object, as you learn to drop all your unselfishness and skillful mental states, there’s a sense of ease and even rapture that can come simply from dropping these things. As the texts say, there’s the ease and rapture that comes from seclusion, when you’re not being bothered or harassed by greed, anger, and delusion. You’ve pulled out of them for a while. That, in and of itself, gives a sense of ease. And fullness to the body allows the blood and the energy to flow evenly. Because when we think you have to constrict the energy in some parts of the body, constrict the blood flow in some parts so that you can move it in other parts, we’re going to drop it. And that little bit of tension that you use in the body is kind of like a sign or a marker to keep the thought going. So when the mind is thinking about a lot of things, it’s interrupting the energy flow in the body. We’ve got to do some thinking. We couldn’t function without it, but we have to learn also when to put the thinking down. So when you put it down, even if just for a little bit, learn how to relax the breath, relax the energy in the body so that it feels more whole and full. That right there gives a sense of ease and well-being. And as the mind gets more and more centered on the breath, on that sense of ease and well-being, the mind grows stronger. The sense of refreshment grows stronger. Those are some of the benefits you can get along the path. But we can’t stop there, because the meditation has other jobs as well. Trying to figure out why it is that the mind will jump off into thought worlds. Thoughts that lead to suffering, that lead to stress, that lead to disappointment. Why do we keep doing it? Where is that point of choice in the mind, that point of mindlessness, when you’re not really alert to what’s going on? Why does that happen? Why does the mind tend to hide these things from itself? It’s not always an innocent lapse. Sometimes the mind knows it’s about to go off into something unskillful, and it will hide its motives from itself. Why do we play along? This is why, when the mind is settled down, there’s more work to be done. And it’s work that’s best done in a mind that is settled and solid, refreshed. Because part of the reason for going off into those little thought worlds is that we’re hungry. We’re looking for some entertainment. We’re looking for some diversion. We’re trying to feed the mind. And it’s pretty bad food. This is why the Buddha talks about concentration as good food for the mind, healthy food for the mind. Rice. Beans. Ghee. Honey. Butter. Those are the staples. In particular, the ghee, the honey, the butter, the sugar, and the oil. These are considered to be tonics to strengthen you, to give you energy. That’s the fourth jhana. When the mind is fed with things like this, it’s not quite so hungry. It doesn’t crave its diversions quite so much. There is that tendency in the mind, even though it’s got good food, it likes to go back and eat the old garbage it’s been eating. It’s like the person who’s finally learned to appreciate healthy food but starts missing tuna melts, Philly cheesesteak, something nice and greasy, lots of calories, lots of bad fats. Why do we hanker after those things? They have their allure. This is why we have to think. We have to analyze what’s going on. The Buddha said there are five steps to going beyond an unskillful mental state. One is to watch it arise, watch it pass away, see that it’s something that comes and goes. Not so you can be the mental state, but so you can watch it. Some people talk about learning to own your anger, to own your greed, or whatever, to allow yourself to feel that you really are the anger, are the greed. That’s not what the Buddha taught. When you are something like that, you can’t really observe it. You’ve got to realize, again, there is anger, there is greed in the mind. That’s all you have to admit. That way we’re not dealing in repression. We do admit these things are there. We want to watch them. But you need a foundation. That’s why we practice concentration, so you can have a separate spot where the mind can support itself. And watch these things come, watch them go. Because you want to start seeing, well, what comes along with them, what goes when they go, so you can start understanding how they’re fabricated. In particular, you want to see the point where the mind decides to choose to go along with them. A useful technique here is to start out by making a practice. Whenever a thought appears during your concentration, just zap it. In other words, try to locate where is that spot of tension in the body that corresponds with the thought, and just breathe right through it. And the thought will go away. And try to get quicker and quicker and quicker at doing this. Because as you do this, you’ll begin to see there’s a point where the mind decides it wants to go with a thought. And right there is where you can see what you like about this kind of thinking, what’s the allure. That’s the third thing you want to learn about these things. Why do you fall for them? Why do you enjoy them? Why do you enjoy greed? Why do you enjoy anger? Why do you enjoy thinking about sensual pleasures? Why do you enjoy planning for them? What’s the gratification that comes out of them? Sometimes it’s your sense of yourself that goes along with them. These images we have of ourselves as being more powerful when we’re angry, more energized, or that somehow we’re better when we’re angry. If we can lay claim to parts of the world, if there’s a glamour that comes along with sensual pleasures, all kinds of things we can use to dress up these states that we find attractive. Then to balance that out, you have to start contemplating the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, starting with the immediate drawbacks. How do you feel when anger is eating away at the mind? Greed, lust are eating away at the mind. The feeling in the present is not especially good. But we’re used to thinking, “Well, we’ll put up with that tension and there’ll be some release further down the line when we finally get what we want.” Either to say, if you’re angry, to say the nasty thing you want to say or do something nasty in response. Or the greed or the lust, when we actually gain the object we’re feeling greedy for or lustful for. So we put up with that tension in the thought, but then you look at, “Okay, if you actually did get what you wanted, what would follow on that?” The story doesn’t stop there. What kind of mental state do you have after gaining what you want? And what do you have to do in order to get what you want? What position are you putting yourself in? The Buddha has a lot of analogies, for instance, for the drawbacks of sensuality. He says it’s like borrowing goods. You borrow somebody else’s money and things, and then they come along and they take it away right in front of everybody else. You were going around showing off your wealth or pretending that it was your wealth, and then it gets taken back. It’s the sensual objects we get, the pleasure we get from those objects. They’re not really ours. It depends on them. We’re their slaves. We’re in debt to them. In the image of a man going up and getting fruit in a tree, another man comes along. He doesn’t feel like climbing the tree. He’s going to cut it down so he can pick off the fruit. Well, the man up in the tree is going to get injured, to say the least, if he doesn’t get out of the tree right away. In other words, if your sensual pleasure depends on a particular relationship or a particular object, there’ll be people who want to come along and take it away. That’s the kind of position you’re putting yourself in if that’s where you’re looking for your happiness. Someone once complained that the Buddha has lots of graphic images about the drawbacks of sensuality. Well, we’re so addicted to that sensuality, we’ve got to have really graphic, strong images to remind ourselves of what it’s actually like. So we can see it in a new light. And then when you can see both the allure and the drawbacks, you’ll see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure. This is when you begin to develop dispassion. That’s the fifth thing you need to know, how to develop dispassion for that particular disturbance, that particular defilement. So this is some of the work we do once the mind has gotten settled down. It involves some thinking, it involves some analysis, but it’s analysis in real time, watching the mind as it picks up a thought like this, and saying, “Well, why does it do that?” The more quickly you can catch these thought worlds as they form, the more easily you see where that moment of choice was. You can see what it’s based on, and you can see that it’s pretty unskillful, pretty unwise, and it doesn’t really provide the long-term pleasure that you would like. So when you develop dispassion for these things, the next time around you’re not going to choose them. The deeper that dispassion goes, the more you’re freed. So when the time comes that there are things that you do have to think about, you can think about them and put them down. At the end of the Buddha’s discourse on how to deal with distracting thoughts, he says, once you’ve mastered the techniques of dealing with your thoughts, you will never think again. He says you can think when you want to and you don’t think when you don’t. You’re in charge of the mind. It’s not that these things are in charge of you. You’re in charge now. There’s a great deal of freedom that comes from that. You’re not as weighed down. Actually, thinking in terms of greed, anger, and delusion, that’s a heavy burden on the mind. It requires a lot of work. It’s work that we’re used to, that we’re familiar with. That’s sometimes why the work of the meditation seems a little bit onerous. But once you’ve developed these other skills, the ability to see through the allure, to see how things arise, pass away, see their allure, their drawbacks, and how you can develop and escape from them, which is what the dispassion is, the mind is a lot more free, a lot less burdened. The thoughts it does get engaged with are thoughts that give good results, that are worth thinking. And the rest of the time, you keep the mind still. In John Lee’s images of a knife that’s kept in a scabbard, you rub it with oil and keep it sharpened until the time comes when it’s sharp. You really do have to cut through something that’s sharp. It’s not going to be rusty. If you don’t sharpen it, you just keep hacking and hacking away at things, and you don’t keep it in a safe place. It gets left out in the rain, so it starts developing rust. You find you can’t cut things through properly, and sometimes you cut things with rust, a rusty knife, a dirty knife. If you try to eat them, you get sick. So we’re learning how to take care of this knife in the mind. When it really does have to do work, it can do it well. It may involve a little work to get the mind in good shape, get your knife sharpened and safely in the scabbard. But once it is, it requires a lot less effort than just hacking away with your dull knife, rusty knife, dirty knife. In these terms, it’s obvious that the work of the meditation is really worth doing. And in the long run, it involves a lot less effort than the effort that we put into our normal way of being at the mercy of our thought worlds. It’s the work that a wise person chooses to do.

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