Your Quiet Corner

December 3, 2008

We’re fortunate to have this quiet corner here, a place tucked away in the hills, at the end of the road, where you can get away from all your outside responsibilities. It’s a good metaphor for the rest of the world. It’s a concentration in the mind. It’s a quiet corner in the mind where you can get away from all the back-and-forth of all the different thoughts and opinions and feelings that come through the mind in the course of the day. You stay here with the breath. Get the breath comfortable so it can be your ally. You’re more and more inclined to want to stay in this quiet corner because there are so many thoughts that would want to pull you out. You’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to worry about that. Whatever the issue that comes up in the mind, it’s good to have a place to get away from those things and just be with the breath. The chattering may go on in the mind. As long as you realize the breath is still coming in, the breath is still going out, the chattering doesn’t make the breath go away. All it does is distract you, so you learn not to get pulled away by the distractions. It means valuing the breath, that you’ve got this place. This quiet spot. And being willing to give up a lot of the ups and downs that sometimes we enjoy. A lot of people find it difficult to stay with the concentration, not simply because they have trouble getting focused, but because they really don’t want to let go of their thoughts. This is why the Buddha said, “There are two ways of dealing with distracting thoughts, but some of them all you have to do is watch them, look at them, and you see how ridiculous they are. And you can let them go.” Just having this quiet spot to stand and look can make a huge difference. But with other thoughts, you look and you look and you look and you still get pulled in. That’s where you have to make an effort, even though part of you may side with that thought. The part of you that realizes, “Okay, this thought is unskillful,” has to have its tools, because otherwise it gets swamped. There are three kinds of effort. There’s the effort of just dealing with the breath. In some cases, you make the breath more comfortable, and the power of a particular thought gets undercut. So many of the thoughts have their power because they get into your breath. They make you breathe in a certain way and you feel physically stirred up by the thought. The thought seems especially real because you feel it. You feel it in your gut, you feel it in your bones. But that’s simply because you’ve let that particular thought take over the breath. It’s hijacked the breath. This is one of the reasons why we start with the breath as our topic of meditation, learning how to make it as comfortable as possible, regardless of the situation. Even though the breath has been calmed down, there are still going to be hormones going through your bloodstream, and they’re still going to have an impact on how you feel in your hands, in your arms, in your legs. You have to learn patience, realizing eventually the hormones will get washed out and then you’ll be back to where you were before. But at least you’re not churning up more and more and more all the time. And the fact that you can get the breath comfortable, then you can use the other forms of what the Buddha calls fabrication—verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. Verbal fabrication is the way you pose a question in the mind and then how you evaluate the issue. This is why the Buddha placed so much emphasis on which question is worth asking, and which ones are not. If it’s a question that has to do with where the stress is, what’s causing the stress, what you can do to put an end to stress, those are questions that are worth asking. You want to look at things in terms of cause and effect. This thought that you’ve got entangled with, this emotion you’ve got entangled with, where is it going to take you? Where does it lead? As the Buddha said, he realized that he got onto the path when he was learning how to divide his thoughts into two types, the skillful ones and the unskillful ones. They’re skillful and unskillful based on where they take you. How do they feel when you’re thinking of them, and what do they cause you to do? You can ask yourself that question. Do you want to go where that thought is taking you? Do you want to go where that emotion is taking you? You’re going to find yourself divided. Part of you wants to go with it and part of you doesn’t. This is where you have to develop your wisdom. When you see clearly that a particular thought is going to take you to a place you don’t want to go, even though you like it, and you find yourself going back to it again and again and again, you’ve got to make the effort to understand what’s unskillful about it and why you, deep down inside, really don’t want to go with it. The way you think through the issue is going to be something very personal for each of us. The arguments that finally sway you, the arguments that finally work, will vary from person to person. Part of the reason the thoughts are so insistent is that we like them. We get some kind of pleasure out of them. One way of analyzing them is to look at what pleasure you get out of them and then what are the drawbacks. Is the pleasure worth the drawbacks? Say there’s a thought of anger, indignation. This is something we all like, this sense of being justifiably angry. What is the pleasure of justifiable anger, and what are the drawbacks? You’ve got to learn to weigh these things for yourself and see, ultimately, that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, the pleasure, the gratification that comes with that kind of thinking. But the argument that’s going to work for each of us, that’s something we have to learn how to produce ourselves. That’s one of the reasons, in the forest tradition in Thailand, the Inchans don’t explain everything. They set up an issue, they ask you a question, but it’s up to you to figure things out. Sometimes the Inchan will do something, and it’s up to you to figure out, “Why is the Inchan doing that? Does he have a good reason? What’s his reason?” I noticed among the different Western monks who studied in Thailand, there are some who simply say, “Well, that’s just a Thai way of doing things,” or, “That’s just the Inchan’s own personal preference.” They never really learn. That’s when you ask yourself, “Well, maybe the Inchan has a really good reason. What would the reason be?” That’s when you find that you’re learning and begin to internalize and develop your own discernment, develop your own way of figuring things out. Because ultimately, that’s what it comes down to. The teacher can only point things out, but each of us has to do the work. That’s verbal fabrication. You exert a verbal fabrication against the distracting thought. Then there’s what’s called mental fabrication. It’s feeling and perception. How do you perceive the issue? How do you perceive the situation? Can you perceive it in different ways? This is why the Buddha uses so many analogies in his teachings. When you’re angry, it’s not because you’re angry at somebody. It’s because you think of yourself as a person who’s having to go through the desert, hot, trembling, thirsty. You need water. You have to learn how to take the water wherever you can find it, even if it means coming across that little puddle of water. We’ve mentioned so many times, a puddle of water and a cow print footprint. It’s a demeaning posture, but you get down and slurp it up out of the footprint, no matter how demeaning it may seem. You realize you’ve got to do that. You’ve got to look for the good in the people that you’re angry at. That’s nourishment for your own heart. Instead of holding to the picture of yourself as having been wronged or having been justifiably angry, you realize that’s just setting more fire, making you more and more thirsty. You try to adopt these perceptions because they’re very useful. They help overcome all these unskillful emotions. They’re good tools to use. If we look at the texts, sometimes we see, “Well, there are the meditation instructions and there’s all this other stuff, all the Buddhist stories and analogies and things. It’s part of the traditional part of Buddhism, but it’s not really necessary.” That’s an attitude that’s widespread, not only in America, but also in some meditation circles in Asia. But those perceptions that we’re given, those are meditation instructions. You give them a try. That’s what all of this is. We’re giving it a try. Our conviction in the teaching is not unshakeable until we’ve gained stream entry. And you’re not going to get stream entry unless you really work hard at the practice. It involves taking a lot of the Buddhist teachings on faith, even though we may have some doubts about them here and there, but they seem to make sense. We realize that if we don’t follow this path, what hope do we have for putting an end to suffering, even though the mind may be divided? So here’s my chance. I’ve got this quiet corner. Let’s see what I can do to strengthen the skillful parts of the mind. The unskillful parts have been pushing us around, leading us by the nose for who knows how long. But where do they get us? They don’t get us to release, that’s for sure. This is a possibility. That’s what his first teaching was all about, and that’s what his whole teaching was all about. We owe it to ourselves to explore this. Does the Buddha really know what he’s talking about? Here’s our chance to find out. So you make the most of this quiet corner. As you focus on the breath, work with a sense of fully inhabiting your body as much as you can. If you find that an emotion comes in that storms through your bloodstream that you can’t inhabit the whole body, well, you find at least one spot in the body where there is a sense of stillness, a sense of well-being that’s not pulled into the torrent. Learn to cherish that spot. It’s the kindest thing you can do to yourself, and the people around you benefit as well. This is what’s so good about the Buddha’s teachings. He finds a meaning for happiness, a type of happiness, that’s not like the happiness of the world. In the happiness of the world, if one person gains, the other person loses. And the person who lost does what he can to gain it back. It goes back and forth like this. As the Buddha said, it’s like fish in a dwindling puddle. The quest for happiness, the quest for happiness, the quest for water, doesn’t really give them the water they want, because the water is draining away. At the same time, they prevent one another from getting the water. That’s the happiness of the world. The happiness of the Dhamma is based on your own developing skillful qualities in the mind. You benefit, the people around you benefit as well. Nobody loses. So make the most of this quiet corner while you’ve got it.

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