Whatever Comes Up

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It’s noteworthy that when the Buddha taught the Dhamma, he would lay out the path of practice in a fairly systematic way, starting with basic practices and moving up. But there’s no one place where he puts everything in its place. In other words, he gives a general sketch, but then most of his teachings are specific to particular people. This person had that problem, that person had this problem. And you look at the way they’re arranged in the canon, and it’s pretty haphazard, it seems. They’re arranged so that they’re easy to memorize. But it’s not necessarily the case that everything starts out with basics and then moves up from the basics. It’s because the ways of the mind don’t come in nice, neat lists or nice step-by-step problems. When your defilements come up, they don’t line themselves up from easy to hard. Sometimes they come all at once, sometimes some really difficult ones followed by some easy ones, which means that you have to be prepared for anything that may happen to come up in your meditation. This is why the Buddha started his teaching on stretching out with some basic skills to prepare the mind so that it can deal with whatever comes up, and at the same time giving you a way of narrowing things down so that you’re here to be with a breath, to work with a breath. Be aware of the whole body, calming the breath, giving rise to a sense of ease and refreshment that you then spread throughout the body. That’s the basic technique. And then you find various other things will come up to get in the way as you work on the technique. Those are the issues you deal with. And primarily, in the beginning, you can’t hope to end greed once and for all once you’ve dealt with one instance of greed or anger. You can’t hope to end greed once and for all when you’ve dealt with one instance of anger. But you take things one at a time, because you’re not dealing with all your types of greed. You’re dealing with this specific type of greed that comes up, or this specific type of anger, or whatever the defilement or hindrance may be. And your purpose at this stage is simply to get it out of the way so you can get back to the breath. It does not mean denying that it’s there. It’s simply that you weaken it enough so that you lose interest, at least for the time being. And then you get back to the breath as quickly as possible. In some cases, this means simply noting that the mind has wandered off, so you bring it back. Remind yourself of why you’re here. But sometimes that’s not enough. So, as the Buddha recommends, you focus on the drawbacks of that particular distraction. If you followed it, where would it lead you? Is it something new you’ve never thought of before? For the most part, our distractions are the same old things over and over again. It’s like watching old movies. It’s like watching old TV clips. Remember when Kennedy was assassinated? We were fascinated watching it over and over again on the TV, hoping that maybe this time the bullet wouldn’t come. And of course it always came. It’s the same with the thoughts in the mind. A lot of things we thought about again and again and again, and they just don’t change. But for some reason we go back and chew on them like a dog chewing on a bone. And so when you can see that there’s really nothing of any interest in that particular thought, that it leads nowhere, it’s like a bad old movie. Then you can get back to the breath. If the mind, for some reason, keeps going back even then, then you can ignore the thought. In other words, consciously stay with the breath, even though you know the thought is in another part of the mind. Because even though the thought may appear, it doesn’t have to consume all of your attention. You can still be aware of the breath coming in, going out, and hold on to the breath. If the thought’s going to keep running, well let it keep running, but you don’t have to go into that particular screening room. Or you can focus on how keeping that thought in mind is going to require a certain pattern of tension someplace in the body. Try to locate when the thought arises, where is that pattern of tension? And then breathe right through it. Think of it loosening up, untangling, dissolving away. Or you can just clamp down really, really strongly on the breath and say, “I’m just going to stay right here. I’m not going to think that thought.” These are the standard approaches that the Buddha gives, the standard techniques for dealing with distracting thoughts, and they’re good skills to have. And you find that they work regardless of the nature or strength of a particular distraction. You may have to work your own variations on these five. Put whatever the distraction that comes up. When you learn how to work on these variations, you’ll find that you’re more and more skilled at staying with the breath. And you’ve learned to weaken your defilements, in the course of which you also weaken your suffering. You’ve learned how to step back from your thoughts and not immediately get pulled in. Most of us, certainly, as soon as a thought arises, it’s like it has a magnet in there. We get stuck on the magnet. What you’ve got to do is learn how to remove the magnet. See, it’s simply a thought that arises. It’s a fabrication of the mind. It has meaning, and it has a narrative line, and it has a hook, only because we give it those meanings. And the more you can see this, the more you’ve learned an important lesson about the mind, how the mind fools itself. And this is ignorance in action, craving in action. You learn about these large issues by dealing with the particulars of what’s coming up right now, right now. It’s as if when the mind is with the breath, you’ve established your arena for dealing with these issues. So number one priority is to make sure the arena is well-designed so that you have an advantage. You might think of it as a battlefield. You want to put yourself on top of the hill. You want to put yourself in the most secure position. You want to get the body on your side by breathing well through the body, giving rise to a sense of ease and well-being, so you’re less and less inclined to want to go for the pleasure of the thrill that comes from thinking thoughts that have lots of ups and downs, like a roller coaster. You begin to see there’s really nothing much there. And so you deal with whoever comes. Easy issues, hard issues. As I said, they don’t line themselves up neatly from first grade level to college level. Sometimes a calculus-level problem comes up, but you learn how to give it a karate chop. You don’t have to work out all the calculus to pull yourself away from it. Because what all these thoughts have in common is that they’re fabricated. They’re made out of perceptions and fabrications, and they have a feeling tone. And as you work with them, you begin to notice these general patterns. Again, not as abstractions, but through developing your strategies, through developing your tactics for dealing with these things. And so on the one hand, it’s kind of frustrating. You can’t look at your practice and say, “Well, I’ve dealt with that defilement and dealt with this defilement, and they’re all gone, and I’m ready to move on to the next level.” It’s not like a video game. There are ups and there are downs, easy and hard. But after a while, you do begin to notice that you’re getting more proficient at dealing with whatever comes up. Then you know how to go for the jugular of any particular thought that arises. Even though you may not be able to uproot it, at least you get it out of the way so you can get back to work on the breath. And that’s where you begin to see your progress. You find it easier to return to the breath, and you can stay there for longer periods of time. You feel more at home there. Which is why the Buddha has you focus here as your main practice. When you meditate, you need a theme. He calls it the nimitta. The word nimitta in the Canon doesn’t mean a sign or a vision the way it does in the commentaries. It means simply the theme of your meditation, where you focus. Then you want to make it your home. This becomes, as he says, your ancestral territory, the place where you’re safe, where you can deal with any enemies as they arise, from whatever direction they attack, because you’re in a solid place, you’re in a secure place. You have the advantage. It’s not the case that you get to choose who’s going to come first, who’s going to come second, when the mind gets assailed by these things. But you learn to trust in your weapons, you learn to trust in your skills. And sometimes you’ll get knocked out, get knocked down, but you find you can get back up again. And each time you get knocked down, you don’t go back and just bemoan the fact. You ask yourself, “Well, what went wrong this time?” And you learn from your mistakes. It’s like burning a dish in the oven. You don’t just give up on cooking. You ask yourself, “What went wrong? What’s wrong with the oven? What’s wrong with the dish?” Something. And you realize you can learn. That puts you on top. And over time, you find that as the enemies come, they’re easier and easier to deal with. When the mistakes happen, they’re easier and easier to figure out. And you start dealing with the subtleties that you missed the first time around. John Lee gives the example. He says when you’re getting the mind to come to stillness, it’s like cutting down a forest of trees. When you start developing the insight that really allows you to cut through your defilements once and for all, it’s like taking the forest of those cut down trees and just burning them up. The space is a lot wider open, more spacious, more limitless. In other words, it’s the same process over and over and over again, trying to bring the mind to stillness, and then figuring out whatever it is that’s getting in the way. It’s simply that the “whatever” gets more refined, so it’s going to require more subtlety, more focused powers of being observant. But it’s the same general principle. You’re trying to bring the mind to stillness, and you find that there’s something getting in the way. So you work with it. And ultimately, it’s not just a matter of giving it a quick karate chop and just getting it out of the way for the time being. You find that you actually uproot things. And when that will happen, nobody can say. But that’s where the practice goes, if you stick with it. That’s the persistence, the patience, and learning to use your powers of observation. That’s what brings you progress.

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