Patience & Consistency

February 17, 2010

The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means to develop, to help something to grow. That’s what we’re doing here. We’re trying to grow mindfulness. We’re trying to grow concentration. And it’s useful to think about it in the same way that a plant grows. It’s not the case that you put a seed in the ground, water a little bit, and the plant immediately springs out of the ground. That happens only in cartoons. It takes a lot of steady care. Think about the sun shining every day, every day, every day, constantly. Then you apply water on a regular basis, and the seed sits there in the soil every day, even more constantly than the sun. The sun, of course, goes, the earth turns, and there’s no more sunlight. But the seed is there in the soil, getting nourishment all the time. It’s not the case that it takes off on weekends or comes back. If the seed came and went, it wouldn’t grow. It has to stay very still. That’s the same with your mindfulness and alertness. You have to be as steady and consistent as possible in staying with the breath, in staying with whatever your object is for the concentration. The greater the state of mind, the greater the steadiness, the greater the consistency, the more the good qualities of the mind are going to grow. We don’t like to hear this. We like to have the peak experiences that we hear about. And there are ways that you can induce extreme experiences in the mind, either consciously or unconsciously. But that’s not the point of the meditation. You’re trying to develop mind states that you can watch over periods of time so you can understand how does a mind state form, how do skillful states form, how do unskillful states form. In the case of the skillful ones, you have to stick with them for long periods of time, get them going so they’re solid and dependable, so that you can really understand them. As for the unskillful ones, well, it takes a lot of good steady concentration so you can maintain a foundation and watch these other states as they arise, stay for a while, and pass away without getting sucked into them. You need a good, firm foundation. You don’t have to be used to staying with that foundation regardless. It’s like Ulysses, bound to the master of the world. He would have steered the ship in their direction. That would have been it. That would have been the end of the ship. It’s the same with us. As a thought arises, we’re so used to just going into the thought, inhabiting it, that it requires a real training in new habits for the mind. Not to get pulled in, but to stay and just watch these things as events come and go in the mind. So you’re trying to get a really good, solid concentration here. And for the concentration to be solid, the causes going into the concentration have to be solid. So if you’re going to stay with the breath, you want to stay with each breath, each breath, each breath. Don’t let this get mechanical. All the way in, all the way out. It helps to have some strategies for helping the mind stay this way consistently. That’s why we work on getting the breath comfortable and being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and the whole body as you breathe out. Because a centered and broad awareness lasts a lot longer and is also more helpful in gaining insight than a very narrowly focused one. If you focus, it gets confining after a while. But when your awareness is broad and covers the whole body, then you can maintain this centered but broad state of mind in all your activities. As you move around and as thoughts come and go through the mind, you can maintain your frame of reference, which is the body as a whole, and not get knocked off. So watch the breath. You can induce a sense of comfort in the breath in one of two ways. One is just posing the question in the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good?” Or, “How would long breathing feel?” See how the body responds. “How would shorter breathing feel?” See how the body responds. You don’t have to do the mechanics. The body will take care of that for you. Just pose that question in the mind. Or, if the body refuses to respond, you can test it for a while. Just keep breathing in long for a while. Do it more intentionally. Then try short breathing intentionally. Deep, shallow, fast, slow, heavy, light. Test all the various possibilities. Sometimes the body gets into a rut. It has one habitual way of breathing, or a very limited range of ways of breathing. It doesn’t want to move out of that rut. But if you force it a little bit, maybe it’ll find that it actually prefers another kind of breathing. But the purpose of this is to give you a sense of comfort, to give the mind a place where it can settle down and be consistent in its gaze, be consistent in its mindfulness, its alertness, its persistence, all the good qualities that nourish the mind. It’s not that you gobble down huge amounts in a short period of time and then wander off. You take a bit here, and a bit there, and then a bit, and then a bit, and just stick with it bit by bit by bit. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, “What we’re doing is just a little tiny thing, but you have to do it consistently.” In Thai, this was a pun. There’s the word nit, which means little, and the word nit, which is spelled differently but pronounced the same way, which means consistently. So you do something that’s just a little bit, but you do it consistently. In the same way that the sun just shines consistently. And as the seed is subjected to the consistent sunlight, and the consistent water, and the consistent soil, it has a chance to grow. It’s not dramatic. But then you’ve probably noticed with plants that the ones that grow very, very quickly are the ones that die very quickly. It’s the plants that grow slowly, particularly the trees that grow slowly. Those are the ones that are going to last hundreds of years. So we have to watch out for impatience, one that wants to get quick results, dramatic results. And remind yourself that meditation is a lifelong process. It’s not like you’re trying to get yourself into extreme states. You’re trying to watch the mind, observe the mind, so you can understand the mind. That requires a consistent gaze, because otherwise we see the mind in just little bits and pieces. Connect the dots. There’s a dot here, there’s a dot there, but there are huge spaces in between them. And the dots don’t come with numbers. So we end up connecting them any old which way. And think we understand something, because after all, we have our little bits and pieces of evidence. But if you watch things consistently, it’s not just dots. You see the whole picture, and you begin to see the dots. And that where you drew the lines had nothing to do with the reality of the situation at all. So it’s this quality of consistency, just sticking with it, sticking with it, sticking with it. In some cases, just a little bit of pleasure comes along. Respect that pleasure. Don’t despise it. Don’t say, “Well, this is a little tiny thing. It’s not what I’m here for. I want something bigger.” Give it a chance to grow. Because plants start out that way, just little tiny shoots coming out of the ground. And if you step on the shoot every time it comes out, it’s not going to grow. So in this little bit of pleasure, nourish it, protect it. Water it. Make sure that no bugs come and eat it. The bugs are the hindrances. They may come, but you pull them away. You let them go. You let them pass. You’re here to focus on the breath. Notice where you feel it. Find a spot in the body that’s especially sensitive so that the slightest discomfort in the breath will be immediately apparent so you can make adjustments. And again, if you’re right there with that sensitive spot, sometimes you don’t have to consciously make adjustments. Just stay with a sensitive spot and it’ll tell you when to breathe in, when to breathe out. But the important thing is that you try to be as consistent as possible, as steady as possible with your gaze. It’s like trying to light a fire on a windy day. You have to protect this little tiny flame. Until ultimately it catches. Then it’s big enough so it can take care of itself. But especially in the beginning, it requires a lot of hovering around, being very protective. And you’ve probably seen it happen, that little tiny, tiny flame. You think, “How could this ever become a large fire? It’s hopeless.” But if you abandon it, then you really will be hopeless. That little tiny spark will have no chance at all. But if you cup your hands around it, protect it from the wind, it’ll grow a bit and then it’ll grow a bit and grow a bit. And then as you’re patient with it, it’s got a chance. Or you can compare it to sharpening a knife. In the old days, they didn’t have these mechanical knife sharpeners. You had a stone and you had some water and you had the knife and that was it. You rubbed the knife against the stone and you would water it a little bit and rub it some more. And you had to be very careful how you rubbed it that you didn’t get impatient and try to rub it down too fast and put too much pressure on any one spot because that would ruin the blade. You had to be very even and consistent in the pressure you applied. And you found ways to encourage yourself as you were doing this. One of the skills that many of us have lost is how to keep the mind entertained and how to keep it occupied with a slow process that requires consistency and requires patience. The games the mind can play with itself. How many breaths can you stick with the breath? This is one of the reasons why they do counting in meditation. If you find that you were able to stay with the breath for nine breaths, the next time you do it, let’s make it eleven. Then let’s skip up to twenty and see if we can double it. Whatever you can do to keep the mind occupied, keep it absorbed in what you’re doing. You can play with the breath, experiment with it. The important thing is that you are as consistent as possible in watching it. It’s only then that the meditation will have a chance, and the good qualities that you want in the mind really will have an opportunity to grow.

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