Motivation

May 31, 2010

Buddha says there are four motives for practicing concentration. One is to have a pleasant abiding here and now. In other words, you practice for the sake of having a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, as long as you’re in the concentration, and then pretty much leave it at that. Another motivation for practicing concentration is to give the mind a good solid basis for mindfulness and alertness. That’s underlining the point that the Buddha didn’t see concentration practice and mindfulness practice as two separate things. You try to get the mind centered so you can be really mindful and alert about what you’re doing. The third motivation is to gain psychic powers, and the fourth is to put an end to your defilements. And for most of us, the practice tends to fall into those first two motivations. It feels good once the mind settles down. We like it. It’s our daily hit. Of course, our days when we’re just not able to get our hit, the mind refuses to settle down, and you get frustrated. And even when you can, there is that sense we discussed this afternoon. Once you’ve got your measure of pleasure and ease, you say, “Okay, that’s enough. Let’s get on with other things.” And it just becomes a little island in the vast sea of the day. Get out of the waves, get out of the dangers of the sharks and all the other dangerous animals in the sea. You have a little spot where you can rest, gather your strength, recover, and then you plunge back into the sea again, as if the sea were your main business. And even though it is important that we gain this sense of well-being from the concentration, don’t leave it just there. Because that kind of concentration can deteriorate very quickly. And as I said, it can be a source of frustration. When you can’t get the hit, when you can’t find the island, the currents of the ocean have pushed you way out of the way, and you can’t find where that island could possibly be. You can’t even see it on the horizon. You get really frustrated. This is why we have to work on those other motivations, particularly the motivation to develop more mindfulness and alertness. Because even on days when your practice of concentration doesn’t give rise to a sense of ease or well-being, you at least have developed the habit of looking at your mind, watching what it’s doing in the present moment. And even though it may not be filled with pleasant sensations, pleasant notions, it’s good that you watch your mind in this way. You get to know it. So this is the mind when it’s obstreperous. This is the mind when it’s acting out. You kind of start asking yourself, “Well, why is it doing this? What’s going on here?” And you have the opportunity to learn. When the meditation does go well, you can’t just sit there and think. Just leave it with a sense of ease. You want to use that sense of ease as a foundation. For the mind to stay in the present moment, it’s a lot easier if that’s a sense of well-being that you can keep tapping into there. And as you’re situated here in the present moment, you can start seeing the other thoughts that go through the mind that would pull you away from the concentration. The thoughts that say, “Well, that’s enough for right now. I’ve got another business.” Well, you can ask, “What is this other business? How really valuable, how really important is it? If you were to die tonight, would you be happy that you had wandered off from your concentration?” This is where the practice of mindfulness and alertness is helped not only by concentration but also by discernment. As you look at what it is that you get out of those various involvements, and particularly your involvement with other people, as you go through the day, we have some old habits about how we interact with others, to what extent we want to force our will on them, to what extent we feel victimized by them. You’ll know all the other games that people play. Remember that old book from the seventies? And even though we know that a lot of this is games, it’s still a game. Still, we can’t help but jump right in. This is where having a good, solid foundation with your breath is important. You can look at this and say, “Well, that’s a game, but I don’t need to play that one anymore.” In a lot of these really injurious games, you’re best to stay out of them. The ones where you get injured by others or where you injure others. So having a good, solid foundation in the concentration is important for learning to cast a skeptical eye in your ordinary involvements. Despite a lot of the psychological jargon that goes around, it’s not wonderful that we’re constantly involved with other people. There’s a lot of wear and tear. And practicing concentration gets you out of that dynamic so you’re not getting worn down and torn down by others, and you’re also not wearing them down and tearing them down. You’ve got your own independent source of food here. You’ve got your own source of strength. And so anything that would pull you out of that sense of well-being, out of that sense of being centered, you’ve got to learn how to question. Many times the mind will say, “Well, you have to do this. You have to do that. Otherwise, that’ll happen or this will happen.” You get worried about it and you say, “Well, is that really true? Let’s try it. Let’s experiment.” One of the most important lessons of concentration practice is learning how to cast a skeptical eye on the mind’s justifications, its ideas, its rationalizations for its old habitual patterns. Because that’s what clinging is. It’s a series of habitual patterns. The things you just do over and over and over again. The thoughts you think over and over again. The attitudes you maintain over and over again, whether they’re appropriate or not. The mind holds on to these things because it’s afraid that if it doesn’t react in its old ways, things will start falling apart and slipping out of your control. And maybe it’s good to say, “Well, what happens if your sense of control, especially if it’s an unscalable sense of control, gets released a little bit?” Skillful control is skillful control over your mind. Learning how to stay with that sense of well-being, not trade it for things of lesser value. One of Ajahn Fueng’s students was meditating with him one afternoon. They went home, and her mind was in really good shape from the meditation. But then she started gossiping with a friend at home and found that what she’d gained from the meditation just got wasted away, wasted away. So she went and commented on this the next day. And Ajahn Fueng said in his straight-speaking way, “So you had gold and you traded it for shit.” So have a sense that you really do have gold here when the mind is settling down. It’s got that sense of being centered, balanced, stable. Have some respect for your concentration. And then try to carry it into your life. The same way that you have some really good food, and you want to carry that in with you. You want to make sure it stays balanced so that the bowl of food doesn’t spill out. And as you’re trying to maintain that sense of balance, you begin to see the currents of the mind that would tip you off balance. Get back on your feet. Back to the old image of the island and the ocean. You want to stay on the island. If there’s anything good in the ocean, it’ll get washed up on the shore. Don’t worry. And you find there’s a lot of garbage that gets washed up on shore as well. But you don’t have to go jumping into the ocean to find the stuff. You stay on the island. And then you can go walking around the shore of the island and seeing what’s washed up. If there’s anything useful, you take it. If it’s not useful, you can just leave it there. The ocean will wash it away. But you want to maintain your sense of priorities. You want to maintain your sense of what’s really valuable here. You need the meditation not just so you can have a nice, restful place to stay, but it’s a basis for learning to be more mindful, more alert, so you can develop greater skill in how you interact with other people because you’re coming from a source of strength. You’re coming from a position of strength. You’re coming from a position of clarity. And you don’t want to just throw that away. You’ve got something good here. Don’t trade it for things of lesser value. Think of that image of the man with a bowl of oil on his head. The bowl of oil is filled to the brim. The man has to work between a crowd of people on the one side and a beauty queen on the other side. The crowd of people are all excited about the beauty queen. And the beauty queen is singing and dancing. But there’s a man following behind, the man with a bowl of oil on his head, with a sword raised. And wherever the first man drops even a drop of oil, the other man’s going to cut off his head. So think of that image. It’s an image of balance and restraint. You’ve got all the interesting things in the outside world. That’s the beauty queen. And then you’ve got all your emotions clamoring. But you want to stay balanced and solid in between those things. That’s what the concentration is all about. The Buddha says that walking with a bowl of oil on your head is an analogy for mindfulness immersed in the body. Mindfulness and concentration together. That’s when the practice gets really good. One of the Jon Furon students, a teacher in a high school in Bangkok, had extremely strong powers of concentration. But the concentration would last only when she was sitting there with her eyes closed. And she complained to him after several months of the practice that she didn’t see that the concentration was making any difference in her life at all. And as he told her, she said, “Well, you’re not using it. You’re indulging it, and then you’re just throwing it away.” So you’ve got to look at your motivation. And when the mind says, “Okay, that’s enough. Let’s go have a cup of coffee. Let’s go do something else,” you say, “Wait a minute. The work isn’t done. You’re just getting your foundation for the next step. And is that foundation really secure?” You may say, “Well, this is enough pleasure for me right now.” But it’s more than the pleasure. Now that you’ve had that pleasure, now you want to learn how to use it. This is one of the most important principles in the Buddha’s practice. The pleasure is not an end in and of itself. The pleasure is part of the path. You use it for a higher end. You want to develop more mindfulness, more alertness, so that you can eventually get to that stage of seeing your defilements getting washed away. So take a careful look at your motivation for practicing, if it’s just because it’s a nice, pleasant place to be. That motivation, even though it’s okay, it’s a legitimate reason for why you practice concentration, but it’s not going to carry you through. You’ve got to realize there’s more work to be done, because otherwise you find that you lose your island. You’re just floating out in the ocean, just waiting for some wave to come crash over you, and that’s the end. So don’t put yourself in that position. You’ve got this island. Learn to make the most of it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2010/100531%20Motivation.mp3>