Respect for Concentration

August 17, 2010

In the passage we chanted just now, the Buddha talks about respect for the training as a way of keeping yourself from decline in the practice. The training has three parts. There’s virtue, concentration, and discernment. What’s interesting about the virtue is that it’s interesting that even though concentration is included in the training, he gives it special emphasis by mentioning it explicitly. Part of the reason is because concentration is so important, and the other part is because people tend to overlook it. It’s good to remember that when there’s a Buddha who found the Eightfold Path, the first factor he found was right concentration. He’d been undergoing austerities and realized that that led nowhere. So the question arose to him, “Could there be another way?” And he remembered a time when, when he was young, he was sitting under a tree. His mind had just kind of naturally entered into the first jhana. So he asked himself, “Could that be the way?” And something said in his mind, “Yes, that is the way.” So, why am I afraid of that pleasure that comes from that concentration? It’s not intoxicating. There’s nothing blameworthy about it. It doesn’t harm anyone. So even though he’d been living for six years totally afraid of any kind of pleasure he realized that this was one kind of pleasure that was not to be feared. But then he realized that he would not be able to attain that state of mind when he was so emaciated. So he began eating food again. And then it was that he, on the night of his awakening, realized the other factors of the path. But it starts with concentration. As he explored the implications of concentration, he found that it had to be based on virtue. It had to be the result of skillful resolves. You had to focus on looking for a pleasure that was not based on sensuality, that was not based on doing harm to others. And so gradually he began to realize the implications of right concentration. He began to realize how it implied the other factors of the path. And as the Buddha once said, even though you may understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasure, if you don’t have a higher pleasure to depend on, you’re going to keep falling back on your old sensual pleasures. Because sometimes we hear about the sensuality and the dangers of concentration. There was a book that came out a year or so ago on the topic of right concentration. On page one, they define right concentration. Then you get to page two and it immediately talks about the dangers of concentration. This is pretty typical in a lot of modern teachings. They try to scare you away. They tell you how pleasurable it is and how nice it is, and you’re going to fall for it and get stuck. So you’re better off doing some other practice. But that’s not how the Buddha taught. He said you need the pleasure, you need to get stuck there for a while. You need to develop the skills to get you there and to be able to make access to that pleasure whenever you need it. Because otherwise you’re going to go back to your old ways. The Buddha does mention the drawbacks of concentration at one or two points in the canon. But it’s simply that if you get satisfied with your concentration, then sometimes you’re not willing to move on. But that’s it. Compare that with the drawbacks of sensuality. People kill over sensuality. They steal. They have illicit sex. They lie. They take intoxicants. They cause all sorts of damage to themselves and the people around them. Because you want certain sights, certain sounds, certain tastes. You want certain smells, tactile sensations. You look at our society today. The people who have all these pleasures are doing everything they can to hold on to them. And they’re willing to see society fall apart rather than relinquish them. It’s a sensual desire. It’s not a desire to indulge in our sensual desires. There are lots and lots of dangers. So in comparison with that, the dangers of right concentration are very small, very minor. And they’re a lot easier to comprehend and go beyond. And as the Buddha said, there really is no insight without concentration, no concentration without insight. He’s talking about right concentration. So it’s not just the pleasure that we get out of the concentration in getting the mind to settle down. You gain some understanding about it. You’re working with direct thought and evaluation. You direct your mind. You direct your mind to the breath, and then you evaluate the breath. This gives you insight in the process of fabrication. These are called verbal fabrications, the way the mind talks to itself. And the Buddha wants you to get very sensitive to this intentional element that you put into all of your thinking. And so to get really sensitive to it, he says, direct it in a skillful way. The Buddha was very strategic. He didn’t just tell you to drop things. He would say, before you can really drop them, you have to understand them. And the best way to understand them is to master them. Put them to a good purpose, if you can. You’re working with the breath. That’s the primary factor that fashions your sense of the body. We walk around and we sit. We tend to think of the body as a big solid lump. That’s our primary experience of the body. But if you really look at it carefully, your primary experience of the body is the movement of the energy. And the in-and-out breath has a huge impact on the movement of the energy. So again, you want to learn how to master that. Learn to use that impact skillfully so you can understand it. Once you understand it, then you can let it go. To stay with the breath requires holding a certain perception or metal label in mind. It can be a word, just breath, or a metal image of what the breathing involves. And then there are going to be feelings—either pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain—associated with the breath, associated with the process of getting the mind to settle down. Those are called metal fabrications. These are the things that have an impact on the state of your mind. So again, you’re learning how to manipulate these, how to master them, how to get sensitive to the process. Because we’re doing it half-consciously all the time. So if you want to understand it, bring it up into the light of full consciousness. So if you’re really doing the concentration correctly, if it is right concentration, then you’ve got to be gaining insight into the mind. So the concentration and the insight go together. The greater the stillness of the mind, the more clearly you can see things. The more clearly you see things, the more you can get the mind to settle down. Because what you’re looking for are the disturbances in the mind, how the mind creates unnecessary stress for itself. You start with the breath, noticing that you have some unconscious ways of dealing with the breath. So bring them up into the light of consciousness. Which ways of breathing lead to added stress in the body? Which ways can reduce that stress? That’s the primary lesson in the Four Noble Truths. Then, as you get sensitive to this process of bodily fabrication, and it grows more and more still, then the verbal and mental factors come more and more to the fore. So it’s not the case that you do concentration practice for x number of days or weeks or months and then turn to insight. There are insights all along the way. And as you get more and more sensitive to the process of what you’re doing and understand it better, the insights go deeper and deeper. Because you’re gaining insight into what you’re doing right now, which is what it’s all about. The Buddha’s not trying to force a particular way of looking at the world on you. He gives you concepts as tools to help you explore what you’re doing, to understand this process of fabrication in the mind. But the specific insights you gain will depend on how you’ve been doing it, the areas that you’ve been only half aware of or not aware of at all, where your particular habits are, where your particular attachments are. Where your particular misunderstandings are. We each have our own misunderstandings. And so the insights that are going to make a difference will vary slightly from person to person. So what the Buddha’s doing is having you focus right here, at the point where the mind and the body meet at the breath. So you’re in a better position to see what you’re doing. Then he gives you the tools to analyze what you’re doing. As you shape your experience of the present moment. Because it’s not just past karma that’s shaping this. There’s your present karma, the present intentions. And that precisely right there is what the Buddha wants you to get sensitive to. It’s like learning a musical instrument. You spend a lot of time practicing, but it’s not just the time put into the practicing that’s going to make the difference. Say you’re practicing your scales and all of a sudden you begin to notice that you’ve been doing a particular scale awkwardly. And because it’s been awkward, it doesn’t sound right. It takes up too much energy but gives bad results. So you figure out a new way of doing the scale that takes less energy and is less awkward. And the music sounds better. As you meditate, you’re going to begin noticing the areas where the mind is awkward. The way it approaches something, the way it focuses. Sometimes putting too much energy into something that actually backfires. Sometimes putting too little energy in so you never really dig deep enough. So the amount of time you put into the practice is important, but it’s the ability to notice, to be sensitive to where you’re doing something awkwardly, where your ignorance has gotten in the way of you seeing exactly what you’re doing and how you could do it better. That’s where the insights lie. This is why you want to invest a lot of time in concentration practice. It’s not a mere formality that you go through to get to the real work. The real work is right here. Even if it’s just a day spent pulling the mind back to the breath, back to the breath, back to the breath because it keeps wandering off, it’s time well spent. Because at some point you’re going to begin to figure out, “Why is the mind wandering off?” Maybe you need to step back and deal with a particular problem first. If greed, lust, anger, fear, laziness, lack of confidence are getting in the way, there are specific ways you can think around those problems. Give rise to a sense of well-being and confidence in the present moment, an energy that you want to devote to the practice. And then the mind will settle down with the breath. Or, after a while, if you’ve been watching the mind wander off, you’ll begin to notice that before it wanders off, it’s sending signals already that it’s going to go. It hasn’t gone yet, but it’s about to go. When you can catch those signals, then you can double your efforts to stay with the breath, make it more comfortable, make it more interesting. So there are lessons to be learned. If you get exasperated and can’t come up with any idea of what you’re doing, go out and walk around a bit. Then come back and look at the problem again. With new eyes. But this is where our focus is, is learning how to get the mind to settle down, settle in. In the course of mastering that, you learn an awful lot. So this is why the Buddha has you respect concentration. You’re doing it not simply as something to get past so you can get to the real insights. You pay attention to what you’re doing while you’re doing it. That’s a lot of what respect is, giving it full attention, learning to appreciate it. And that’s when you learn.

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