An All-around Perspective

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They’ve done studies on rats that show that rats that have been subjected to a lot of stress start losing their ability to engage in goal-oriented behavior, and they tend to fall back into old, habitual ways of doing things. Their way of measuring this is that they have a little bar that the rats press. If they’re not subject to a lot of stress, they press the bar only when they’re hungry. But if they’ve been subjected to a lot of stress, they just keep pressing and pressing and pressing the bar, whether they want to eat the food or not. If you could translate this into human behavior, it explains a lot. People are subject to a lot of stress and they just go through old habits. Old patterns of behavior. Whether those patterns actually are helpful or not, they just keep doing the same things over and over again. It’s a form of clinging, clinging to habits and practices. It’s one of the things we fall back on when we don’t know what we’re doing, or get confused. As the Buddha said, we’re bewildered by stress. We don’t know why it’s happening or what to do, so we just go back and do whatever we have been doing. This creates a lot of misery in the world. So as we’re meditating here, we’re trying to find a way out of that. One is to give the mind a restful place to stay. When the mind’s well-rested, it can think more clearly, see things more clearly, and see that a lot of its old, habitual patterns are really counterproductive. So this is why we meditate, and this is why we get the mind into concentration. There is a fascination with concentration, with all the lights and other things you read about, all the psychic powers. But as the Chan Fung once said, those are games. You can play around with them sometimes. They’re fun, sometimes they’re not so much fun. People get ensnared in them and waste a lot of time. So you have to remember why we’re practicing concentration. It’s not for the attainment badges. It’s for the sense of well-being, the rapture that comes when the mind is able to settle down. You have to feed on that. And then once the mind is well-fed, then you take this well-fed mind and you do something useful with it. One of the Thayajans was talking about how when he was studying under Ajahn Mun, for eight years he was stuck on concentration. And it’s interesting that Ajahn Mun let him stay there. He could see that this monk was going to need it. A break of conversation came up when it became obvious that the monk was beginning to see that the stillness of concentration might be the same thing as the stillness of nibbana. All you have to do is look after it, maintain it, and that’s what it would become. Ajahn Mun probably had a few choice words about how it was basically a lot of delusion in that stillness. That set the monk off on the quest for insight. He said, “When you have concentration, it’s like having all the gianti right now. All the building materials you need for a house, but you just let them sit there. You don’t do anything with them. You’ve got the breath, you’ve got your direct thought, you’ve got your evaluation, you’ve got the feelings of pleasure, you’ve got the perceptions, and you’re making a nice fabricated state out of them. Because these are the things with which we fabricate our experience. But ultimately you want to learn how to turn around and look at them. What exactly is this process of fabrication? What are these choices you’re making as you fabricate? So you start using perception in another way, not just to stay with the stillness, but also to understand what’s going on here. What are these processes? How does the mind create these worlds within itself? And what perceptions can be used to start taking the process apart? To use another analogy, it’s like becoming a film critic with the purpose of someday making your own films. So you start looking at the way, say, a stillness scene is composed. Instead of simply getting into the story of the movie, you start looking at how the scene is lit, how it’s edited. In other words, going into all the technical details of making a film to understand why it has the effect it has. But instead of deciding that you want to create more films here, basically you’re learning how not to be pulled into these films. In other words, you’re trying to understand the effect so you don’t continue to be deluded by it. So it’s important as we’re practicing that we understand the purpose of what we’re doing here. We do want to get the mind to settle down. We do want the mind to get still. But it’s for the purpose of seeing things more clearly. So the question is, when you’re practicing concentration, what kind of concentration do you need to see things most clearly? The Buddha recommends concentration that’s all around. He says you want to develop a sense of ease and well-being, and then you let it spread, see it permeate throughout the body. He talks about being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and aware of the whole body as you breathe out. It’s because this whole-body awareness allows you to see things all around. Because one of the main problems of the mind is that it deludes itself, fools itself. It can put up walls. It has huge blind spots. And if you tend to be looking at something in only one direction, huge areas are blinded. And this is where the mind allows itself to get hung up, say, in greed or anger or delusion. It focuses on just a few things and ignores all the other implications and all the other ramifications of pursuing that one defilement. And it shuts off huge faculties of the mind. Issues of, say, shame and compunction go by the board. Issues of compassion often go by the board. So to counteract that tendency to close things off, we want to mind-state that’s more all-encompassing, more all-around. That’s why the Buddha has us, even from the very beginning of the practice, develop these habits of shame and compunction, realizing that our actions have an impact on other people, have an impact on ourselves, and feeling ashamed of any pursuits that would give us a little pleasure but cause a lot of pain. Feeling compunction about those things that you don’t want to cause that pain. Feeling shame that you would allow yourself to stoop to something like that. He has us develop thoughts of all-around goodwill. We chant every evening,”May all living beings be happy,” as a way of broadening our horizon. He has us develop states of concentration, again, where the mind is all-around, so that we can see not only the object that it’s focused on, but also all the elements in the mind as they’re focused on the object. Which elements are feeding off that object? What is the nature of that feeding? Is it harmful or harmless? Blameworthy or blameless? You want a state of mind that can see these things. That’s why there’s such an emphasis on all-around awareness. At the same time as you allow that sense of ease and well-being to saturate the body, that puts the mind in a much better position where it’s able to make the proper choices. So it’s not so wound up in its habitual behavior. You can step back and see how a lot more would be accomplished if you could let go of all those unskillful habits. Tapped with a clearer sense of what you really want out of life, over the long term, as opposed to what you just simply crave right now. So this is the kind of concentration we’re working on. It’s part of a larger process that the Buddha teaches of seeing things all-around. That chant we do often about, “I’m subject to aging, illness, and death, separation, and I’m the owner of my actions.” Actually, the reflections aren’t supposed to stop there. They’re supposed to go on to realizing that all living beings are subject to aging, illness, and death. It provides a larger perspective, thinking only about how you’re a subject to these things and you’ve got your actions as your arbitrator. The Buddha says that helps you to get your act in order. To abandon unskillful behavior, it’s when you think about the larger context that you develop a sense of sanghvega. No matter where you go in this universe, everybody is subject to aging, illness, and death. They have their actions as their arbitrator. Thinking about that is enough to want you to get out. When you think about all the water in the oceans and realize the tears that you’ve shed over these many, many lifetimes, it’s greater than the water in the oceans. That’s also meant to develop the sense of sanghvega, to develop the desire for release. In the Satipatthana Sutta, he has you focus not only on bodily events, feelings, mind-states, mental qualities, you and yourself, but it’s the way that the canon clearly shows. When he talks about external events, he’s talking about the fact that these things apply to other people as well. You have a breath, you have problems with your breath, other people do too. You have these feelings, you have these mind-states, other people do too. It helps depersonalize the whole process. As you get the larger perspective, it’s a lot easier to let go of what’s unskillful in the way you behave. So as you think about the type of mind-state you’re trying to develop right here, you’ll find that it will go through mood swings and get really focused and very narrow sometimes, very broad at other times, sometimes so broad that it’s losing its bearings. But what you’re aiming for is one that’s balanced, i.e., focused in one spot, but you do have a sensitivity that goes all around. So try to find that point of balance where you are focused, but your awareness is broad. Because it’s only with that kind of mind-state that you can see all around you and see where the defilements of other lives would sneak up and hit you over the head and run away. Don’t have a chance, because you can see them coming. Jon Chau once said that Jon Mun would talk about making the practice in the shape of a circle. And as with a lot of Jon Mun sayings, you can interpret that in many ways, all of which are beneficial. In other words, it’s a year-round practice. It goes around the clock. In other words, you don’t have times where you practice and other times where you don’t practice. You want to make it as continual as possible. And you want your mindfulness to be all around. You want your discernment to be all around. So that you’re safe in all directions.

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