Victory Ground

February 6, 2012

The practice of concentration sometimes gets a bad rap that it’s all about running away, putting blinders on your mind, and trying to avoid the reality of things. And yes, there are some types of concentration where the mind does that. You blot out the body, you blot out your awareness, the things around you. Sometimes it gets blotted out with darkness, sometimes it’s blotted out with light. But in neither the darkness nor in the light can you see anything. The Buddha’s practice of concentration is different. He has you focus in on the body. For some people, focusing directly on the body to begin with is dangerous territory, either because of physical pain or because of emotional issues. You may need something else to start out with first to get the mind to settle down and feel that it has a safe space. Sometimes a sense of space literally is the place to settle down, and other times it’s thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity. These allow the mind to settle down somewhat to the point where it’s willing to look into the breath and look into the body. If you want to see the issues in the mind, the body is a good mirror, because a lot of the movements of the mind get reflected here. So that’s why we work with the breath, to get sensitive to how the movements of the mind affect the breath. But first, to give a sense of safe ground in the body itself, so you feel safe and you’re aware of the body. You can deal with issues that come up in the mind and not feel threatened or overwhelmed by them, so you don’t have to keep running away. The running away is called repression, where you get into denial about things. And denial doesn’t solve anything. We want to be aware of what’s going on in the mind. We don’t want to feel that we have a handle on things. That’s when you’re dealing with aversion. Goodwill is often offered as an antidote to aversion, but it’s not meant to just blot it out. The purpose of developing thoughts of goodwill and the other brahmaviharas, compassion and empathetic joy, and equanimity, is not so that you love people who are bad, who have been horrible, but so simply that you have goodwill for them. In other words, you don’t wish for their suffering. You actually wish for them to behave in a way that leads to happiness, genuine happiness, which doesn’t mean that you’re accepting the way they are or condoning the way they are. Simply, you’ve got to straighten out your intentions with regard to them. Because if you’re thinking about some other person’s bad behavior and you’re adding ill will on top of that, the issue gets really sticky. Because you can’t really trust what you’re thinking or saying or doing with regard to that person. And so it’s hard to sort things out. So you ask yourself, “Why would I not want that person to change his or her ways, to be truly wise, and to act in a way that leads to true happiness?” Now, there are some cases where you would like to see the person squirm a bit before they develop wisdom. But you have to ask yourself why. Often when people suffer, they just get worse. They start thrashing around. A lot of cruelty comes from weakness of one kind or another. People who look strong actually know that they have a weak spot inside someplace that they’re hiding. And that’s why they’re cruel. So when you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill to someone, you’re not trying to blot out your memory of their activities or blot out the fact that they’ve done something wrong. You’re simply setting your motivation straight so you can sort out what exactly you think about their situation and remind yourself that the most important thing, given any situation, is how to respond. How can you act in that situation? What can you say that would be most effective? What can you do? What can you think that would be most effective? And if you can’t think of anything, just leave it for the time being. But at least it opens the issue in a way that’s safe. At the same time, you want to watch what’s happening in the breath as you’re going through this analysis. When there’s a catch in the breath, or there’s a tension in the breath, or there’s a sudden change in the rhythm, immediately pose the question, “What happened?” What stealth movements went through the mind? And at first you may not see much, but at least you’re open to exploring. Because all too often the reason we repress things in the mind is because we’re afraid of them and we’re afraid we can’t handle them. We’re afraid that they’re going to overcome us. And so it’s important that you learn how to occupy your body, occupy the energy in the body in a way that doesn’t get overcome, where the emotions can wash past. In the image of the Buddha, it’s like having an island in the middle of a river. The river flows past you, but you’re on the island. You haven’t made your way across to the other shore yet, but you’re at least in a relatively safe place. You can watch the currents. One of the important skills in meditation is learning how to stay in position as you watch the currents of thought flow out. Lampo Dune talks about how it’s the mind flowing out that leads to suffering. And John Lee identifies that mind flowing out as one of the asavas. And to see that flow without flowing along with it is a really important skill. Because that allows you to see your thoughts without feeling overwhelmed by them, threatened by them. And in this way you can be aware of these things without getting overwhelmed by them, and you’re not ignoring their force and you’re not ignoring their presence. And you’re not trying to cover them up with lots of cotton candy goodwill. You’re not putting whipped cream over the world. The purpose of goodwill, the practice of goodwill, is to sort these things out. There’s a good amount of thinking that has to go through this—directed thought, evaluation. Why is it that there are certain people that you simply cannot feel goodwill for? Again, you don’t have to like them. You can feel goodwill for people you hate, or people that you are really angry at. The goodwill means that you feel goodwill because you hope that that person straightens him or herself out and comes out being happy. You’re not here to settle old scores, because you’ve got your work that you’ve got to do, because you’re making yourself miserable with those thoughts of ill will. And you’ve got to learn how to deal with that. So we’re not pretending that other people are all good. Sometimes the anger may be justified, but even if it’s justified, why get entangled in it? Why make yourself suffer over it? That’s what you want to learn, to see that you don’t have to suffer from these things, from all the injustices and cruelties in the world. Again, it’s not that you’re running away from them. You’re taking care of your business. Because if you allow yourself to suffer over these things, make yourself suffer over these things, you weaken yourself, you wound yourself. And when you’re weakened and wounded, issues come up in your life and you can’t take care of them yourself. You start thrashing around and become a burden on others. So we’re not here to repress things or run away from them or blot them out. We’re here to create a safe space in the mind where you can look at these things and not feel overwhelmed by them, not feel threatened by them, and have a sense that you have a handle on the situation. And even though you may not understand how you’re going to work your way out, an important part of the practice is having the conviction that you can do this. Once you’ve created this safe space, that’s the beginning of the evidence that you can show yourself, “At least there’s this one spot in here where I can make the breath good at any situation so I don’t feel overwhelmed.” And then you can move on from that, develop from that. This is why the Buddha put conviction as the first strength, that you can do this. This is a skill that is effective and you can master it. It’s important that we understand that discernment comes from conviction. It’s like finding yourself lost in a cave. If you’re convinced that there’s a way out, you’ll keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, and that will give you a chance to come out. If you’re not convinced that there’s a way out and you’re doubtful, or you’re convinced that there’s no way out, you give up. Then you’re done for, for sure. So even though you may not see the way out of things at the moment, remember that a lot of people who were in a lot more darkness and a lot deeper in the cave than you are right now, they were able to find their way out. You start by getting your bearings. Fortunately, we’re not totally in darkness and we’re not in a cave right now. We’re meditating. We have our awareness of the present moment. We’ve got the breath. We learn how to make that comfortable. In this situation, where things are relatively easy, you need to learn how to expand it to other situations that are more challenging and still maintain that sense of awareness. It’s about spacious ease filling the body. The Buddha calls this mindfulness immersed in the body, and it’s also mindfulness filling the body. When you’ve got a safe space, you can deal with things. You don’t have to run away. So as we practice concentration, it’s not a matter of blotting out our awareness. It’s actually very different. We’re creating a safe spot in here where we can be a little more open to what’s coming at us, either from the past or from the present. And you don’t get washed away. You don’t get overwhelmed by it. You don’t get drowned in it. And from there, then, our confidence can build. Our understanding can build. So try to be as fully aware of the breath as you can. Make this your territory, your safe space. And as I say in Thailand, this then becomes your victory ground, the place where you win out. Not because you’re running away, but you can face things down, understand them, take them apart to the point where they’re no longer a threat. threat.

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