Insight from Evaluation

April 10, 2012

An important aspect of how you get the mind to settle down is how you talk to yourself, what you say as you’re trying to get the mind to focus on the breath, what you notice, what you realize you have to change, and how you come up with ideas of changing it. In Pali, this is called vittaka and vichara, direct thought and evaluation. For most of us, the way we talk to ourselves, the way we direct our thoughts and evaluate things, can be pretty harmful. In fact, we think of it as being distracting all the time. But what we have to learn how to do is bring these qualities to bear on what we’re doing. Because when the mind is going to settle down, there are times when it settles down almost automatically, and a lot of times when it doesn’t. You realize you’ve got a problem and you’ve got to solve it. And so you figure out where is the problem right now. Does it have to do with the breath? Is there something wrong with the breath? Let’s work with the breath for a while. Try breathing more deeply or more shallow. Heavier or lighter. Think of different ways in which the breath energy enters the body. Ajaan Ali talks about the centers of the breath, or the resting spots of the breath. As you breathe in, think of the breath energy radiating from all of those spots. If you find that any spot doesn’t seem to be radiating any energy, work with it for a while. Think of the energy coming out, say, from the area right above the navel, the area in the solar plexus, the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, the palate, the area right between the eyes, and the top of the crown of the head. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does. How it affects the way you breathe and whether it makes the breath a more pleasant place to be. Here you’re working from the breath into the feelings, trying to develop feelings of pleasure. Allow there to be a feeling of fullness in the body. This means not squeezing out the breath energy as you breathe out. That tends to go back to our old metal picture of squeezing the air out of our lungs. And then as we apply it to the breath energy in the body, we try squeezing that out too, and it’s not good. You want the energy from the breath in the body to be full, with a sense of fullness all through all your blood vessels. Remember your classes in anatomy, where the blood vessels flowing in your body right now are all over the place. Some of them are more central than others. Think of them all being full and staying full all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. And then you evaluate how the mind is doing. If it’s settling down, fine. If it’s not, you can ask yourself what’s still the problem here. Is there too much energy, too much activity in the mind, or too little? Is it sleepy? Is it drowsy? And then try to remember the ways you’ve dealt with those problems in the past. These are the main aspects of what we’re doing here right now. There’s the body, there are feelings, and then there’s the mind. The first three are the establishings of mindfulness. The first three are the frames of reference, and they’re good frames of reference to keep in mind so you can analyze whatever problem comes up as you get the mind to settle down. And John Lee talks about the factor of evaluation as we get the mind into concentration, and the one that is a very necessary aspect of getting the mind to settle down. In some places you hear it treated as an unnecessary and unfortunate activity of the mind. The mind still hasn’t gotten really solid yet, and so there’s going to be some wavering, but you just try to get past the wavering. That’s not the case. It’s part of the activity of figuring things out. And if you don’t figure things out, your concentration is going to be hit or miss. Some days it goes well, other days it doesn’t go well. And there doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. Instead of simply having you accept that fact, the Buddha has you analyze it. These are the areas where something can go wrong—the body, feelings, or the mind. And so you try to notice which part is uncomfortable, which part is not working right, which part could be improved. And then try to use your own ingenuity and your own memory of what you’ve learned to figure out ways of improving these things. This factor of evaluation is the beginning of wisdom and discernment. It focuses you right on the Four Noble Truths when you use it this way. You see that there’s a problem, there’s stress. In the beginning, we’re working with the stress of just getting the mind to settle down. It’s refusal to settle down. That’s the problem. Then you look for the cause. And where do you look for the cause? It’s right here in the body and the mind. If there’s a lot of noise outside, there’s a lot of commotion—whatever there is outside—remind yourself that the things outside are just going to do their own thing. You don’t have to make them a problem. There’s something in the mind that’s turning them into a problem right now. If you feel the need to push back at the noise, that’s going to be a problem right there. An image I like to use is of thinking of the body as a huge screen or a big net with large spaces between the strings of the net. Let the sound go right through. Let the commotion go right through. If you have activities from the day, let them just go right through. You don’t have to get involved with them. There are at least some areas in your awareness that you can make still. Let those be the strings of the net, the wires in the screen, and you stay with them. It’s little things like this that develop your discernment, your ability to think up a new solution to the problem. And seeing that regardless of how bad things may be outside, the fact that they’re impinging on the mind and creating trouble for the mind comes from something going on in the mind itself. It doesn’t have to take on that suffering. That’s the good news of the Buddhist teachings. And this is what the Four Noble Truths are all about—reminding you that the real suffering that’s weighing down the mind is a suffering that’s caused by something going on in the mind. Now, it may take incidents outside to come in and weigh it down, but it doesn’t have to do that. There’s a choice that it’s making. And sometimes we’re so used to making that particular choice, anything comes along and we just lay it splat on the mind so it becomes a burden, to the point where it seems that we’re not making any choice at all. Well, the choice has become so automatic that we miss it. An important aspect of the concentration practice, or any part of the practice, is to see the choices that we’re making that we didn’t realize we were making and realize we can make other choices. How do you expand your range of choices? Well, you listen to the teachings of others and try your own ingenuity. It’s in your willingness to experiment that you develop a sense of your own ability to come up with something and then to test it. Find things that work so you feel more and more competent and gain a greater sense of self-reliance. And so we’re taking the Four Noble Truths as our guide. If there’s a problem, look for the cause. Look for the cause in the mind, because that’s the one you can actually deal with. Some people don’t like this. They feel like they’re being blamed for their problems, which is not the case. The Buddha’s not trying to lay blame anywhere, but he is pointing out that you have the choice not to suffer. And he’s offering you some of the tools you can use not to suffer. And some of them involve strengthening the mind. This is why we develop concentration. In the process of getting the mind to settle down, you gain not only a greater sense of strength and stability, but also a sense of your own competence, your own ability to deal with the problems of getting it to settle down. Because that’s an important part of the practice, your conviction that you can do this. And then as you begin to see the results, this is not just empty self-esteem. It’s based on your own ability to see, “Oh, I figured that out. I figured this out. This works. That doesn’t work. I know.” Even when you try things that don’t work, the fact that you can recognize that they don’t work is a good sign. So this is how the insight that ultimately will lead us to total freedom gets developed. It’s not that it happens as an accident. The Buddha’s image of the path is the continental shelf off of India. There’s a gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The gradual slope is our gradually developing sensitivity. As we deal with one problem, that clears the air a bit and we begin to see, “Oh, there’s another more subtle problem that you hadn’t seen before.” But now that the more blatant problem is gone, you can see the more subtle things. And so you clear those away, layer by layer by layer. That’s the gradual part of the slope. And then there finally comes a point where everything comes together. That’s the sudden drop. And the reason why the path is both gradual and sudden is because the deathless is there, but our sensitivity—how to tap into it—requires gradual development. But once the sensitivity reaches the right point, then you see right through. There’s nothing else you have to do. Our ability to gain wisdom and discernment builds on very basic qualities—directed thought and evaluation—how you look at things, how you analyze your problems, how you work with your ingenuity to come up with solutions. There’s no radical difference between the way we arrive at insights and understandings in the normal way and the way we do it when we get the mind to be still. And John Lee makes the point that there’s a progression from appropriate attention into directed thought and evaluation. Appropriate attention deals with learning how to deal with problems on an ordinary level, and then it moves gradually into a deeper level. It’s not that some meditation technique is going to do the work for us. That’s very ritualistic thinking. But somehow, if you note, note, note, note, note, the ritual of noting is going to do all the work for you. You can’t bypass this process of thinking and exploring. This is one of the first things that struck me about the forest tradition. After having read various Vipassana techniques here in the West, I go over there and they start talking about Vipassana, and they say it’s exploring, probing, questioning, trying to figure things out, and learning how to use your powers of mind to direct a thought and evaluation. So it’s not just abstract thinking, the type of thinking that will pull you away from the problem. You want a thinking that will probe in to see what’s going on right now that’s causing this problem. What choices am I making right now that are causing this problem? What understandings are looking right below the surface right now? You’ve got a question. Pose the question and watch. If one question doesn’t give any insight, try another one. If you can’t manage the energy to question things, at least try to settle down and keep your eyes peeled for what may come. As the Buddha said, some causes of suffering fall away simply when you watch them with equanimity. Others fall away only when you’ve, as he said, exerted a fabrication, i.e., you’ve got to deal with direct thought and evaluation to figure these things out. That’s how the path develops and how concentration practice leads into insight practice. As the Buddha said, you can’t master jhana without some insight and tranquility, and you can’t develop your insight and tranquility unless you’ve got jhana and these things all work together. So try to bring all of these qualities to bear in what you’re doing right now.

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