No One Size Fits All

November 20, 2012

You may know the story of the British defense of Singapore during World War II. They were 100 percent convinced that the Japanese would attack by sea. So they placed all their cannons facing out to sea, and they were put in cement so that the cannons couldn’t turn around. And what happened was the Japanese came by land. The cannons were useless. So the lesson is, you may be 100 percent prepared for one eventuality, but it may not be the eventuality that happens. This is something you encounter in meditation a lot, if you have only one technique for dealing with your defilements, one technique for dealing with the hindrances that come up, such as noting or accepting or whatever. You’ve got your cannons pointed out toward the ocean, and the defilements are going to sneak up on land. So you’ve got to have a wide range of techniques, a whole toolkit, for dealing with distractions as they come, realizing that not every distraction can be treated the same way. In some cases, you can simply note that the mind has slipped off the breath and you’ve got to go right back. It’s helpful when you go back to reward yourself with some pleasant breathing. That’s the quickest and easiest way of dealing with things. Or you may notice that the topic you’re on, the way you’re breathing, is not all that helpful. So you have to make a few changes. Deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. And what worked yesterday may not work today. So try to be very sensitive to what your body needs right now in terms of the breath energy. Other times, though, you need other techniques. Say, the face of someone you harmed one time comes up in the meditation. The usual way of dealing with that is to spread goodwill to that person and then get back to the breath. In fact, about just anybody, any face, appears in your meditation. You don’t want to take it as a sign that there’s something special about that person, or you don’t know whether that person really needs your goodwill. But give it anyhow. You’ll be happy. And if it’s the case that somebody you’ve wronged, try to remind yourself that you don’t want to do that harm again to anybody. So from that person, you start spreading goodwill out in all directions, including yourself. Then get back to the breath. If you find your mind wandering off into something that seems important, an issue, dealing with your work, dealing with a situation in your family, just tell yourself that you’ll get back to it after the meditation. Because there’s no guarantee that the things that come to your mind while it’s quiet are more reliable than other times. And you don’t have to worry about forgetting whatever insights come up in the course of the meditation. The only insights that are really worth focusing on are the ones that have to do with what you’re doing right now. An idea comes about a different way you might focus on the breath, or a different place you might focus on the body. If that kind of idea comes to you, you might try it out. And if it works, fine. You’ve learned something. If it doesn’t work, you go back to the breath. If there’s some issue that you’re dealing with in your daily life that you know might get in the way of your meditation, tell yourself beforehand, “When I come out from the meditation, I’ll think about this.” And you might actually pose a couple questions dealing with the issue, but then drop them entirely. Make up your mind that throughout the meditation session you’re not going to let yourself go in the direction of those thoughts. You’re going to get the mind as quiet as possible. And then at the end, when you come out, see what the mind has come up with in the meantime. It may be something good, it may be something bad, but at least you’ve got something to deal with that’s coming out of a quieter mind. If it comes up with nothing at all, at the very least your mindfulness is improved and your alertness is improved. You’re more prepared to deal with the issue. But don’t let it interfere with your meditation. Because a lot of the defilements, when they come up, they’re not going to interfere with you. Really insist that they are important, that they’re worth focusing on. In fact, this is probably the biggest problem with all the hindrances. They come with their rationales. Sensual desire tells you, “This really is something really nice. You don’t want to miss it.” And that somehow you’ll gain something from taking in that pleasure. Even though, as Ajahn Suwat used to comment again and again, “Yesterday’s sensual pleasures, where are they now?” They’re gone. You may have a memory. The memory may be good, it may be bad. And sense that you miss it, or you realize that you did something unskillful to get that sensual pleasure to begin with. So it’s not like you gain anything from pursuing sensual desires. So when that rationale comes up, really, you’ve got to have a few counter-rationales to remind yourself there’s nothing gained by thinking about those things right now. It’s just a waste of time. The same with ill will. Someone has really wronged you or wronged people you love. They seem really worthy of ill will. But what do you gain from seeing somebody else suffer? And what would the world gain? A lot of times people who’ve been very unskillful get even more unskillful when the bad results of their behavior come back at them. And the fact that you’re sitting here plotting somebody else’s destruction, that’s not a good use of your time. So even though that person may really be a scoundrel, that’s no reason for you to allow that person’s behavior to fill up your mind. After all, what that person did is that person’s karma, your karma right now. Or is that what you’re doing? Are you nurturing skillful attitudes or unskillful attitudes? It’s the same with drowsiness. There are times when the body really is tired and you really do need to sleep, but there are a lot of other times when the mind just gets bored or when something important is about to come up in the meditation but part of the mind wants to avoid it. You get very, very sleepy. So you have to test that. You can’t just say, “Well, there’s drowsiness here, which means my body needs to rest.” You’ve probably encountered this many times before. You get really, really sleepy as you’re sitting here meditating and figure, “Well, I’ve got to go back.” And you get up from the meditation and you’re wide awake. You got fooled by the mind. So you’ve got to test the drowsiness. As I said earlier, you change the topic of your meditation, get up, move around. In the texts, they say that if you have some chants that you’ve memorized, you recite those to yourself. You might drop the breath for a while and focus on visualizing the parts of the body. You might have some work to do, but don’t let it leave the present moment. Because if something really interesting is about to come up, you want to be here to see it. And don’t give in to the fear or whatever that’s trying to keep it hidden from yourself. Same with worry and anxiety. You can tell yourself you really do have to worry about something because it could happen and it could be really bad. But is your worrying going to keep it away and is it going to get you better prepared to deal with that thing? You don’t really know for sure if whatever it is is going to happen. And even if you do know, you’re pretty sure it could happen. You might not be around to see it. Your own life is pretty uncertain. And given that so many things can happen, even in the next few seconds, to say nothing of the next few minutes or hours or days or weeks, your best preparation is to have really well-developed qualities of mindfulness and alertness and all the other good things you can develop while you meditate. So this is a much better preparation than the worry and anxiety. As for uncertainty, you can give yourself all kinds of reasons for doubting whether the Buddha really existed or whether Dhamma really is true or whether the Sangha really is noble. You have reasons to doubt your own ability to follow this path. There are lots of different things you can be uncertain about. But if you keep pulling back, pulling back, pulling back like that, you’ll never get a chance to test things. And John Fung, in an interesting comedy, said that the people who are uncertain are the people who are untrue. They haven’t really truly experimented. They haven’t really given the path a try. And it’s interesting that the Buddha’s recommendation for overcoming uncertainty doesn’t say simply, “Okay, just believe.” It says, “Look at your mind right now. What is skillful in your mind? What is unskillful?” In other words, what, when you do it, is going to lead to a harmless pleasure, and what, when you do it, is going to lead to harm? Look at your thoughts. Look at your thoughts and emotions as actions, part of a causal chain. That way you can see things right in front of you. That’s the only thing that’s going to overcome your uncertainty. When you come up with a distraction that you can’t figure out, well, watch it for a while. See, why is the mind attracted to it? Ask yourself, “What are the advantages that I get out of this distraction? What’s the pleasure I get out of this distraction? What are the drawbacks that come from staying with this distraction?” Again, you’re analyzing things in terms of skillful and unskillful. This is something the Buddha calls “analysis of qualities.” It’s an important one of the factors for awakening. In other words, you’re trying to use a little bit of discernment in understanding, “Why does the mind like that? What particular kind of thought? What does it get out of it?” Many times, it’s something you’ve been over many, many times. The Buddha’s image is of a dog that keeps chewing on a bone. And John Lee’s expansion on the image is that the bone has no taste at all, it’s just the dog’s own saliva. In other words, the object that you’re fixated on has nothing in and of itself that gives you any nourishment. But you enjoy your own activity of embroidering it. Why do you get out of it? Sometimes you can deal with distraction simply by telling yourself, “I’m not going to go there.” As the Buddha says, you put your tongue to the roof of your mouth, clench your teeth, and just say, “I will not think that thought.” That’s not using much discernment. And it’s not the most refined method of dealing with these things. But you need to use whatever range of tools will work. Sometimes that will be precisely the thing that you need. And you don’t have to worry about it being a crude method or an elementary method. Some people get in their meditation, especially if they’ve been meditating for a long time, and they don’t want to use the elementary things. Well, that’s foolish. Sometimes the elementary things are precisely what you need and they’re there. And so the lesson that comes from that, and all of these techniques teach you lessons about the mind, is that you shouldn’t limit yourself only to things that you think are refined or wise or discerning or advanced techniques. You use whatever you need. You use whatever works. So it’s through using a whole range of techniques that you, on the one hand, can protect yourself from a whole range of distractions. And at the same time, you learn a lot of interesting lessons about the mind. We don’t like to have distractions in our meditation. But we can learn from them. In fact, it’s watching the mind as it’s about to leave the meditation that you learn a lot of things about how the mind creates states of becoming, how it fools itself. Part of the mind knows what’s happening, and the other part pretends that it doesn’t know. You want to see this in action. You want to see the stages by which the mind takes an impulse and turns it into a real thought. And then it happens. Because that’s how you learn to understand about becoming, how it happens in the mind, where the stress is, and how you can abort a lot of states of becoming. So remember, the distractions are an enemy to your concentration. But you can learn how to use them as raw material for discernment. Not that you pursue them, but you try to figure them out and figure out what works and why it works. First you’re interested in what works, and then as you get more proficient at it, you can figure out, “Well, why does this work?” As John Lee says, “A person of discernment can get benefits out of anything, good or bad.” So try to be a person of discernment. You’re not going to get to concentration through brute force. There are states of concentration that can be attained through brute force, but they’re not really conducive to the path of liberation. At the same time, there’s no one-size-fits-all kind of meditation technique. You take the basic instructions and you learn to play with them so they fit your case, fit the specific problems that are coming up. And that’s how you develop your discernment. You can master a foolproof technique, and you can still be a fool. But breath meditation is not foolproof. In order to master it, you have to become wise. You don’t have to be wise to begin with, but you have to have the desire to put into suffering. And there’s wisdom in that desire. And the meditation just unpacks it.

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