The Value of Getting Stuck

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There are plenty of books on meditation that, when they introduce the topic of concentration, will immediately warn you that concentration is dangerous. Don’t get stuck on it. Some of them even suggest that it’s best to avoid it entirely. There are also some Buddhist traditions that take the same attitude toward the precepts. They give you the precepts and then immediately tell you, “Well, don’t be too strict about them.” Learn how to wear them casually the same way you’d wear a sweater casually, following them when it feels right to you and not when it doesn’t. And then, of course, there are the teachings that you shouldn’t have any particular views, you should be above views. All this is pretty perverse. It’s keeping people from actually following the path and benefiting by getting stuck on concentration, getting stuck on right view. There’s a value in sticking to these things. Maybe the distinction should be that, that you stick to them. But it’s hard to stick to them without getting stuck. And the only way they’re going to make a real difference in your life is if you really, really stick to them. When you take the precepts, you want to be very careful about them, very meticulous. Why? Because it teaches you things about your actions. You begin to notice things that you used to take for granted, things that used to seem okay. And you begin to realize that they’re not okay, that you actually are harming beings in one way or another. That may seem overly meticulous to worry about ants, but hey, you learn about compassion by dealing with ants, say, other pests in the house. How do you make sure that they don’t harass you but at the same time without your killing them? You exercise your discernment that way. And it makes you think carefully about the other beings that are out there that you often didn’t bring into your calculations about who was being affected by your actions. Now you start thinking about it. The same with concentration. When you really want to protect your concentration, you start seeing the movements of the mind a lot more clearly. If you’re sitting here thinking, “Well, I’ll stay with the breath when the mind wants to stay with the breath, and I’ll just kind of follow it wherever else it wants to go,” it’s just going to wander all over the place. And you don’t learn that much, aside from the fact that the mind has a very meandering path. But if you really want to understand what is the force behind the movements of the mind, you have to resist them. That’s why you keep reminding yourself, “Come back to the breath no matter what. Stay with the breath.” And you learn how to sidestep a lot of the impulses in the mind that otherwise would have pushed you off. And as you really do find that you can settle down with the breath and get a sense of ease and well-being, fullness, saturation, concentration with the breath, it makes you more sensitive to even the slightest stress that the mind creates for itself. So these are important trainings. This is why they are part of the path. They force you to look at your actions. They force you to look more carefully at your mind. You get more and more meticulous. You may go overboard. That’s something that can easily be remedied. The same applies with discernment. The people like to claim that they’re above views. Well, they have certain views to back up why being above views is a good thing. It’s hard to avoid views one way or another. So what if you try consistently to stick to the issues of right view? In other words, where is the stress and suffering in your mind and what are you doing to cause it? What can you do to put an end to it? Stick with that and start ferreting out areas of stress that you, again, took for granted and seemed to be part of having a mind. This is what the mind is like. Okay, now that you know what having a mind is like, what are you going to do about it? It is a problem. We’re not here just to accept whatever comes and goes. That’s not a path at all. We’re here because it’s a path. It’s not a path that goes to awakening. The path that goes to awakening realizes stress is a problem, particularly the stress that the mind imposes on itself through its own sloppy actions, through its own lack of awareness of what it’s doing, the consequences of what it’s doing. Then this way you begin to see more and more subtle things. All of these parts of the practice are for lack of a better term, sensitivity training. Training you to become more alert to your actions, why you’re doing them, what the results are, the actions of the body, your speech, the movements of the mind. It’s by being sensitive to these things that you overcome the big cause of suffering and stress, which is ignorance. The ignorance of what? The ignorance of how you’re creating stress and how you don’t have to. These are practices we have to go through. You can’t bypass them. In the forest tradition, they like to make a comparison with building a table. You have to start out with the raw materials, which are in a raw and rough state, and you have to go through some heavy work. You have to do a lot of sawing and planing until you get to the point where you can simply polish them. And then you’re done. You can’t go out to a tree and just polish it and open it to get a table. You’ve got to do some of the heavy work. And it’s in the course of the heavy work that you’re ready for the more subtle work. So don’t be afraid of getting stuck on concentration, just as you shouldn’t be afraid of getting stuck on virtue or stuck on right view. That’s the only way you’re going to stick with them. And only when you stick with them can they really have a transformative effect on your mind.

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