Let Tranquility Do Its Work

May 27, 2013

There’s a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going to a foreign land and they pay their respects first to the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “Have you talked to Sariputta yet?” They hadn’t, so they go over to say goodbye to Sariputta as well. And he asks them, “You’re going to these foreign lands. What if people ask you, ‘What does your teacher teach?’ What would your answer be?” So they say, “Well, we’d really like to hear the answer.” So Sariputta starts off by saying, “Our teacher teaches the abandoning of passion.” Notice that he starts with an action. He doesn’t talk about the four noble truths quite yet. He doesn’t talk about karma. He doesn’t talk about cosmology. Those things come in later. They’re part of the motivation, part of the explanation. But the first thing is focusing on an action. It’s interesting that in another spot where the Buddha’s talking about the qualities that are needed for awakening, he points to two qualities, calm and insight, samatha and vipassana. When you practice samatha, he says, for the abandoning of passion, and vipassana for the abandoning of ignorance. It’s interesting. It’s the quiet and calm of the mind that does the actual work. That’s what Sariputta was talking about. So as you’re practicing meditation, you’re practicing concentration. Don’t be in too great a hurry to get past concentration, because concentration is going to do a lot of the work you need. There’s a passage where the Buddha said that even though you may know all about the drawbacks of sensuality, if you don’t have a rapture in place, a pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality or something better than that, a higher pleasure, you’re not going to be able to let go of the pleasure of sensuality. So you keep coming back, coming back. In other words, you need the calm, the sense of well-being that comes from the calm, to give yourself an alternative place to go aside from sensual pleasures. And if people say you’re going to get stuck on concentration, well, remind yourself. It’s better than being stuck on sensuality. People do all sorts of horrible things over their sensual desires. When you look in the newspapers, that’s most of what it’s all about. Whereas the dangers of concentration are small. In the Buddha’s analogy, there’s one passage I can find in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the drawbacks of getting stuck on concentration. And the drawback is simply that you get a little lazy and you don’t go further. The idea of abandoning your self-identity just doesn’t appeal to you. The idea of abandoning ignorance doesn’t appeal to you. Well, that can be dealt with. That can be cured. And it is why the Buddha recommends both samatha and vipassana together. What is the ignorance we’re trying to overcome? It’s the ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, you don’t see things as actions and results. You don’t see things as skillful or unskillful. And so the ignorance we’re trying to overcome—that’s calm and tranquility on their own—cannot be overcome. It has to do with two kinds of things. One is that there may be something going on that you’re not noticing because of the calm. It’s got things bloodied out. There may be subtle levels of fabrication going on underneath that, that you don’t see. But without the calm, you can’t see them. Insight on its own, it just can think about things and can contemplate ideas. But to actually see subtle fabrications, you need the calm and tranquility. What calm really can’t overcome is, if you start interpreting things, you get a state of calm and you say, “Oh, this must be the ground of being, or the consciousness from which all things come, all those big ideas that we can build up around meditation and attainments.” That’s what the insight is for. You keep asking yourself, “Okay, what am I doing here? What are my actions? What are my intentional actions contributing to this? And where is the stress?” That’s all there is to those actions. That’s how insight protects you from getting stuck just on levels of concentration. But remember, the concentration does a lot of the work. You get the mind still. You can see things you couldn’t see before. You give it the sense of well-being, the sense of rapture or refreshment. Sometimes the word “rapture” may seem a little bit too strong for what’s happening, but the sense of fullness, the sense that things are really satisfying, just being right where you are. And as the Buddha said, you’ve got to indulge in that. You can’t be too quick to push on to the next stage. You learn to appreciate this. You learn how to attain it whenever you need it. This is an important part of the strategy. Without this, you can’t really let go of your attachment to sensual desires. So don’t expect that the insight is going to do all the work. After all, the Buddha didn’t teach a one-fold path. He taught an eightfold path. Three other factors have to do with concentration practice. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Right mindfulness is not vipassana. Right mindfulness is simply the ability to remember the appropriate things that will act as themes for your concentration. So pay attention to getting the mind still. It really is worthwhile to get the mind in a place where you can see thoughts arising or as they’re about to arise and say, “Nope, I’m not going to go there.” And they disband. You’re not supposed to sit here and just watch the mind as it keeps fabricating thoughts. You do that sometimes so you can figure out exactly what the allure is in the fabrication and what the drawbacks are. Once you see the allure and the drawbacks, you don’t just keep on doing it. The next time another thought like that comes up, you want to snuff it out. As the Buddha says, “You don’t tolerate it.” It has to do with sensuality, it has to do with ill will, it has to do with harmfulness. You wipe it out of existence. And even with skillful thoughts, the Buddha says, you’ve got to let them go so you can get the mind really still, because otherwise you wear yourself out just thinking, thinking, thinking all the time. So let the stillness do its work. Allow it to stay here as much as you can. Be very careful about not stepping on it or squeezing it or whatever else you might be doing to harm it, to not allow it to spread out and fill the body. And then once it’s there, the question that comes up is, “Well, what’s next?” Well, this is what’s next. You keep doing it. As I said before, it’s like a cream that you put on a rash. You don’t just put the cream on the rash and then wipe it off. You put the cream on the rash and you let it stay there. And if the cream dries out, you put some more cream on it. Because the stillness does do work on the mind. As the Buddha once said, to gain relief, peace, which comes both from calm and tranquility, he says, don’t neglect jhana, don’t neglect right concentration. Value it. It’s one of the things we’re supposed to respect, this concentration. And it’s easier to look at it. Of course, a lot of people have trouble getting there, but once you get there, sometimes you begin to look down on it and say, “Well, there’s nothing happening here.” That’s because you’re not looking carefully enough. That’s what the insight is for. But a lot of insight comes from just getting yourself still enough so you can see subtle things. It’s like hearing a bird song off in the distance. But you’re moving around and so you don’t get a chance to hear it. So you’ve got to stop and be very still. Then you can hear the bird song clearly. So tranquility does a lot of important work. Give it a chance to do its work on your mind.

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