Rethinking the Way You Think

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If meditation were simply a matter of forcing the mind not to think, forcing it to be still, there wouldn’t be a need for all these dharma talks. We’d just have a flashing sign at the front of the silo saying, “Don’t think, don’t think, don’t think.” And that would take care of the mind. But there’s more to the practice than just getting the mind still. You can’t just use force. There is an element of force in making sure that you keep with your original intention, which is to stay with the breath. You’re not just going to let the mind wander around as it likes, thinking that you’re engaging in choiceless awareness. The choice is being made when the mind wanders around. Simply because you’re not running into any obstacles, you don’t notice the force of the choice. It’s only when you have something that gives some resistance to the floating mind that you begin to realize the choices that are being made. And a lot of them are quite unskillful. So there isn’t role for just forcing the mind to stay here, but simple force on its own is not going to win the battle. You have to use your discernment to cut through a lot of the distractions the mind throws up for itself. My first year in what Dhammasa did in Thailand, I was alone on the top of the mountain most of the time. And, of course, what happens when you’re alone with yourself? You start thinking about old issues, things that happened in the past, things that happened to you, things that you did. And it’s very easy to get tied up in something that happened in grade school, high school, issues in the family. And what got me through that were two things. One was having the technique of the breath meditation, and two was having a Chan Fung nearby to bounce things off. To get his perspective on things. In other words, you need a good, solid place for the mind to stay, because otherwise thoughts are going to flood over it. But to really deal with those thoughts, and in many cases be done with them, you have to learn how to think about them. This is what a Chan Fung provided. This was a Dhamma perspective on those old issues. I, of course, have been raised in the West with a Western attitude. Things about psychology, Western ideas, especially modern Western ideas about what parents owe their children, or the things we pick up from school, the media. And oftentimes those thoughts get you in a rut. You keep going back over and over and over. A lot of old issues. But if you look at something from the side of the Dhamma, you can cut through. So when an issue like that comes up in the mind, try to remind yourself, “Okay, what was the issue? What was the intention? What understanding did you have at the time?” Think of it as an issue of karma. Something’s happened, and it must be past karma. That’s the only way you can explain how things happen. Things happen to you, things happen to other people. You do something for someone, and it turns out not to be at all what you expected. That’s something you have to chalk up to their karma. That’s where you have to develop equanimity, where things happen to you. And if you just think in terms of the story of this lifetime, a lot of things seem very unfair. It’s not the case that karma makes everything fair, but it does help explain a lot of reasons why things happen and, again, why you have to learn how to accept. So these teachings on karma, the teachings on rebirth, the teachings on all the aspects of what’s merit and what’s demerit, what’s skillful and unskillful, are not just cultural baggage from the time of the Buddha. The Buddha questioned everything in his culture. And even when he accepted certain ideas that were floating around in his culture, he didn’t accept them unquestioningly. He examined them and reworked them so they actually fit in with the practice. When I said that karma doesn’t necessarily make things fair, it’s not that karma is tit-for-tat, that you do x and then you have to receive x back. It’s more that a certain action will tend to lead to a certain result. But then, considering all the actions you have in your life, the way those results work out, what comes first, what comes second, that can be very complex. And in the meantime, you’ve been training your mind, which means that you can mitigate the effects of past karma. We know the image of the lump of salt in the river. If you throw a lump of salt into a cup of water, you can’t drink the water. But if you throw it into a large river of clean water, you can still drink the water. It’s not a problem. If you have a fifty dollar debt and all you have is five cents, you’re in trouble. But if you’ve got a thousand dollars, fifty dollars is nothing. If you train the mind to be more expansive through the Brahma-viharas and learn how to keep the mind from being overwhelmed by pain and pleasure, then you can escape a lot of the effects of your past bad karma. So in other words, karma is not always fair. Think of Angulimala. He killed all those people and then became an arahant. And he suffered a broken head when people threw things at him when he was on the alms round. But that was much less than he would have faced otherwise. So karma was not an advantage just to try to make things seem fair. It’s the way things run, and things run in very complex ways. But it does help you accept things with a lot more equanimity. Things that you can’t change and things you can change. And the big issue is how you’re going to train the mind so that it’s not so easily overwhelmed by pleasure and pain. Some people are afraid of practicing concentration for fear that the pleasure will be just so enticing that they won’t get any further in the path. We have to go through the pleasure of concentration so that the mind is not overwhelmed by it. One of the basic issues as you’re sitting here is when you’re with a breath and there’s a sense of ease. It’s all too easy just to drift into the ease, to drop the breath. And things are pleasant in a kind of foggy, cloudy way for a while, and then you’ve got to fall out. That’s a sign of a mind that’s been overcome by pleasure. If you can stay with the breath and allow there to be the pleasure there, let it spread through the body, but you’re going to keep the breath as your focus. That’s training and not being overwhelmed by pleasure. As for pain, you’re regarded as something that you can learn from. If you keep running away from it or pushing it away, you’re never going to comprehend it. If you don’t comprehend it, there’s no way you can escape its power over you. But if one of the minds settles down, you can see that there’s pain here, pain in the body, pain in the mind. But you’ve got another spot to place your attention, to keep it well-founded. And from there you can look at the pain. Because remember, the duty with regard to pain is to comprehend it, and that means you have to watch it, see where it’s coming from, see how it’s tied up with your likes and dislikes, so that you can get a sense of dispassion towards a lot of those likes and dislikes. If you like doing something but realize that suffering that you’re feeling is tied up in that, maybe it’s time to change your ways. So you try to look deeper and deeper into why you like certain things, why you dislike certain things, and try to view it with a sense of dispassion. One of the really helpful things about having a Jon Fou and to bounce things off was that I would come up with issues that, if I’d talked about them with any other Westerner, or at least any other American, I’d immediately get sympathy, or at least an understanding of where I was coming from. But with some of the issues, he’d look at me and say, “If I came from the other side of the world,” which I had. And seeing that look made me turn around and look at a lot of my old issues and say, “Yeah, that really is strange that I would think in that way or that I would pick up that issue and interpret it that way.” And just being able to step back and say, “Isn’t that strange?” That takes a lot of the power away from your old ways of thinking. Your likes, your dislikes, your attitudes towards what’s happened to you, what you’ve done. Often the way we think about things is part of the problem, but that doesn’t mean you stop thinking. It means you have to learn to think in a new way, in a way that helps to untangle things, helps to take the sting out. Meditation is learning how to step back and not just stop your thinking by forcing it to stop or willing it to stop. But you stop old patterns of thinking by taking them apart. This is best done when you have a measure of concentration already. But you don’t wait until the concentration is perfect before you start doing this. And your ability to take things apart will improve as the concentration gets more solid. The discernment helps the concentration. It’s in working together that they can bring the mind to a really solid sense of peace. A peace that’s not threatened by any thinking at all. In other words, the mind is still at peace. And even if nothing goes, the mind is still at peace. That takes concentration and discernment and all the other qualities that go into getting the mind to settle down and understand itself.

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