The Concentration Omelet

October 15, 2013

The purpose of our meditation is to understand how the mind is creating unnecessary stress and suffering for itself so that it can put an end to that unnecessary stress and suffering. Which means you have to watch the mind very carefully. If you try to be still and just watch what the mind does, you tend to get sucked into what it’s doing. You’re not standing outside. So the Buddha’s strategy is to get the mind focused, to create good qualities in the mind. And in the course of training the mind this way, you begin to see more clearly where it starts moving off. When you see it move off, then you can start seeing why. If you just follow the mind wherever it goes, you’re not going to realize that the mind wants happiness, and yet the way it goes about it tends to create a lot of unhappiness for itself and for other people. So you learn about the mind by focusing it on the breath and trying to keep it there. You learn a lot about the choices the mind makes. First it chooses to stay here, and then a few breaths later it’s chosen to do something else. If you can catch it in time, then you bring it right back to the breath. Make another choice. It’s these choices that shape our life. All the time we’re making choices. What to focus on. It’s like having a TV with lots of channels, lots of different channels you could focus on, you could tune into right now. So tune into the channel of the breath and stay here. Don’t do a lot of channel surfing. Try to stay here and see what it’s like to get the mind to settle down, and what’s needed to get the mind to settle down. There are lots of skills you have to develop. If you’ve ever developed a physical skill that requires some concentration, well, try to think back on what was needed to get that skill mastered. You had to have the desire to do it. Without the desire, it wouldn’t get done. But at the same time, you couldn’t just sit there wanting, wanting, wanting for it to get mastered. You have to take that desire and focus on actually working at the skill, just keeping at it again and again and again. You have to pay careful attention. If your mind slipped off, you have to catch it and bring it right back. And then you have to use your ingenuity, learning how to read the results of what you’re getting and figure out, if things weren’t going right, what you had to change in order to get them going right. These are the same skills you need as you meditate. You have to convince yourself that you really do want the mind to settle down and be still. You want it to be under your control. And you can think about that for a bit. If your mind is out of control, it’s like taking the keys to your car and giving them to a crazy person. The crazy person’s going to drive, who knows where, and end up smashing the car. That’s our life. If your mind is out of control and your mind is shaping your life, then you don’t know where it’s going to take you. So you want to have some control here. If you want the mind to think about it, you really want it to think about it. If you don’t want it to think, you want it to stop thinking. And since we’re so good at thinking all the time, the first step we need as we practice in developing the mind is to learn how to get it to settle down. You don’t stop thinking entirely. Think about the breath. Try to get interested in the breath. Control it. It’s the force of life. It’s what keeps the body and the mind together. And when the breath flows well through the body, it’s good for your health. It gives the mind a good place to stay. If you stay with the breath for a while and you begin to see what works and what doesn’t work, what kind of breathing really does feel good right now, then you find yourself slipping off a bit. Come right back. You’ve got to be earnest in doing this. And if things aren’t working, you can stop and ask yourself, “What’s the problem?” Do you not like where you’re focused? Some people find if they focus up in the head, it causes a headache. Well, you can focus deeper down into the body. And maybe what you thought was a comfortable breath isn’t really so comfortable anymore, so you can change. This is where you use your ingenuity to figure out how you can best get the mind to settle down. If there’s a particular issue that keeps coming up in the mind that grabs your attention, try to focus on the drawbacks of thinking about that. You don’t need to think about anything right now. You have no responsibilities. You may have responsibilities when you leave, but you can put them aside right now. You’ve got to focus on the big issue in life. Because your own mind is out of control. And you can ask yourself these thoughts that come to the mind. If they were movies, would you pay to watch them? Most of them you wouldn’t. There’s nothing much there. A lot of the thoughts are things you’ve thought many, many times in the past. You don’t need to think them again. Here’s something new to do. And in doing the concentration, you learn about yourself. You learn about your mind. The whole practice is a practice of mastering certain actions and then watching the mind as it masters those actions. Concentration is just one part. We observe the precepts. In other words, we say “no” to certain actions. And then you begin to notice, “How does the mind rebel against that?” And how do you deal with a rebellion? Do you side with a rebel? Do you side with a side of your mind that says, “I really would like to get this mind under control”? Even something as simple as using the requisites. We have that reflection every morning, every evening. We haven’t been doing it for the past couple days because we’ve been having a special series of chants. But one of our usual reflections is on the food, clothing, and shelter we use, the medicine we use. We remind ourselves that we want to use these things only in moderation, just enough to protect the body, just enough to keep the body strong and well-sheltered. Because you realize that, having been born in this human body, you’ve got lots of needs. You’ve got this stomach that always needs food put into it. Where are you going to get the food? And who’s being oppressed by the fact that you need food? It’s the same with all the requisites. You’re replacing a burden on the world. So what can we do to keep that burden as light as possible? Then you see the part of the mind that rebels. It thinks, “I’d like to have this kind of food, not because it’s really necessary, but just because it tastes good.” Or, “I’d like this kind of clothing, not because I need it, but because it looks good.” If you learn how to say no, watch how the mind rebels. You learn some interesting things about the mind when you thwart it in this way. You also learn about the mind when you learn how to make it patient. The two big things we have to be patient about in life are physical pain and unkind words. And if you react to these things again, you’re a slave to whoever can say unkind words to you, whoever can inflict pain on you. So you want to develop some powers of endurance. And again, that requires some ingenuity. How do you stick with something like that and yet not just be gritting your teeth? You try to focus on the positive side of whatever’s happening. This is why we have the breath. Even when there’s pain in the body, we can focus on the breath and make sense of it. This will make some parts of the body comfortable. When people are saying unkind words, you notice what’s really paining the mind about those words. The actual sound of the words is not much. It’s what we tell ourselves about the other person’s intentions. The Buddha says when people are saying unkind things to you, one, remember that this is the way human speech is. If you want only kind words, you’re in the wrong realm. Human beings speak kind words and they speak unkind words. They speak thoughtful words and thoughtless ones, true and false, helpful and not helpful. That’s just the way of the world. So it’s not just you. Everybody in the world is subject to these things, and thinking that way helps take away some of the burden, some of the sting. Another point he says when someone says unkind words, just think to yourself, okay? An unpleasant sound is making contact. The mind doesn’t let it stop right there. Of course, the mind won’t let it stop right there. It tries to talk about, “Well, what is this person’s intention? Why do they mean ill toward me?” And you realize, look, those are the thoughts that are causing you trouble. If you can learn just to drop them, then there’s just that unpleasant sound at the ear and then it stops. That’s all. In this way, you protect yourself. You’re not causing yourself unnecessary suffering, and you’re not weighing yourself down. You can maintain your well-being in the midst of all this stuff. But the practice is not just putting up with hardship or denying yourself. It’s also a matter of finding a different source of happiness inside. This is why the Buddha talks about developing your concentration, developing your discernment. Because when the mind is well-concentrated, it has a good sense of well-being. It can take wherever it goes. It doesn’t have to depend on whether things are good outside or bad outside. And in developing that concentration, you learn a lot about the waverings of your mind. And as you overcome those waverings, you’ll learn even more. So it’s not just about sitting here watching, watching, watching, scanning, scanning, scanning. That doesn’t give rise to much insight at all. The real insight comes from doing. It’s like learning about eggs. You can sit and look at an egg for a year and not learn anything about the egg. You learn a little bit. You know what its shell looks like, how much it weighs in your hand. But to really learn about eggs, you cook with them. You make omelets, you make fried eggs, scrambled eggs, poached eggs, egg casseroles. And in working with the eggs, you learn that this is how the egg responds to heat. This is how the egg responds to different ways of cooking. That’s when you really know eggs. It’s the same with your mind. You’re trying to make the mind into a concentration omelet here. It’s how much pressure do you have to put on it, how much heat do you put on it. It’s like making scrambled eggs in the French way. In other words, very low heat. You just stir and stir and stir, and you have to be very, very patient. For a while it looks like nothing’s happening. But gradually the eggs begin to coagulate, and then you’ve got nice, soft scrambled eggs. If you turn up the heat too high, you get rubber. If there’s no heat at all, then you can’t eat the eggs because they’re still raw. You have to figure out just how much pressure you put on the mind, how much pressure you put on the breath. And in that way you learn lots about the mind that you wouldn’t learn otherwise. So it’s in the doing that we learn about the mind. Watching what we’re doing is simply one part of learning how to look at it in terms of what the Buddha calls the Four Noble Truths—looking for where the stress is and then trying to figure out where the stress is coming from. What thoughts in the mind add to the stress? Which ones allow it to subside? Those are the questions you ask. Again, it’s like learning how to ask questions about an egg dish you’ve made. You show it to somebody else and they’ll notice things about it that you probably might not have noticed. They have a more developed palate. But when you talk to them, you go back and you try it yourself, and you say, “Oh yeah, they’re right. It wasn’t cooked enough or it was cooked too much,” or whatever. In this way, gradually your sensitivity to what’s going on in the mind becomes your own sensitivity. Sometimes we read about Buddhist wisdom or Buddhist insight and we think it’s something we can clone. People give us a method. They say, “Don’t do any thinking. Just do what we tell you. Don’t think about it, don’t do anything, and it’ll all come out okay.” But the mind isn’t like that. The mind’s a lot more complicated than an egg. In order to see that, you have to develop your powers of sensitivity, your powers of observation. And the insights, when they come, can be very unexpected. But you know they’re genuine insight because they lower the level of stress and suffering in the mind. You catch yourself doing something that’s creating stress and you can see that it’s not necessary. You just drop it. There’s a little bit of stress in staying on the path, but it’s much less than the stress of not staying on the path. It can lead to a place where the mind is totally free from suffering. You see that, though, because your powers of observation have become more developed as you train the mind and watch the mind as you’re training it. You learn by watching the mind in action. Especially in the action of trying to be more skillful about how you look at things and listen to things and so on. Now you can get it to settle down and be content to stay right here with the ease and comfort of the breath.

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