Looking After Yourself

November 26, 2013

John Foy once said that the practice of mindfulness is a little thing, but you have to do it continuously. In Thai it’s a pun. Little, nit, and continuously. Nit spelled in another way. What he meant, of course, is that it doesn’t require a lot of strength to keep in mind the fact you’re going to stay with the breath. You don’t have to be especially intelligent. But it’s sticking with it. That’s where a lot of the effort is. You need stamina for this practice to really make a difference. Most of us, when we come to the practice of mindfulness or concentration, have our own ideas of where it’s going to fit in our lives or where we want it to fit in our lives. We have some idea of the kind of happiness and the results that we expect. And those expectations can often place limitations on how well we do. A little bit of rest, a little bit of stress reduction, a little bit of time of peacefulness where you can get things together, get your health together a little bit, feel strengthened with the breath, and then you’re ready to go again, off to whatever else you were doing before. This is perfectly normal and it’s perfectly acceptable. Where else are you going to come from except from your own expectations when you come to the practice? But there are times when you have to realize that your expectations are placing limitations on you. You could get more out of the practice if you began to question them. And you see them particularly in this issue of continuity or stamina. When you stay with the breath, how many breaths do you really stay with the breath before you pause for a bit, do a little silence, something else, and then come back to the breath again and ride with it for a while? When you’re out during the day and deciding that you’re going to be mindful as you go through the day, how long do those bouts of mindfulness last and how long are the pauses in between? A lot of this has to do with the understanding we have about how much energy has to go into the practice. Sometimes staying with the breath for five minutes takes all your strength. In a case like that, then you have to ask yourself, “Well, where are you being inefficient in doing this?” Because when the mind is settled and concentrated, you’re getting more energy out of it than you’re putting in. That defies the laws of the conservation of energy, but that doesn’t matter. But the question is, to get there, it’s going to take a lot of input to figure out where you’re putting too much pressure on things, where you’re carrying a lot of burdens around, and where you’re being inefficient. Sometimes just looking very carefully at how you focus and the energy and activity you put into the focusing can help you stay with the breath longer and longer periods of time. But even when you get pretty good at that, there could be some times when you just stop for a bit, wander off, come back. And that’s what you’ve got to question. That’s what you’ve got to push. Because sometimes we’re here for a sense of well-being, we get the sense of well-being, and it’s okay. What’s next? Or we feel we’ve put in enough time and it’s time to go back to our other responsibilities. And it’s good to question that. How about just staying here? Sometimes if you stay longer, you’ll find that the mind will begin to object. And this is where you need defenses against those objections. You have to remind yourself that you’re not here just to rest or relax a bit. Sometimes the mind will say, “This is getting pretty self-indulgent here. It’s really nice, but you’ve got other responsibilities.” And that’s what you’ve got to say. The whole purpose of this practice is to get the mind to say, “Settle down,” and then use it once it’s settled down for the purpose of insight. And maybe it’s not solid enough yet for really delicate insights. You’ll find that whatever level of concentration you have, you will be gaining certain insights appropriate to that level. It’s not that you just do concentration and then switch over to insight. But you want to ask yourself, “Maybe there are insights I’m not seeing. Maybe those insights will rearrange some of my priorities in a healthy way.” Sometimes the ability to stick with this requires that you question your fear of going to something that’s unknown. The mind has never been that quiet before. It’s never been this still before. Remember, we’re here to attain the unattained, to reach the as-yet unreached, and to reach the as-yet-unrealized. Which means we have to do things we haven’t done before, staying longer, more consistently. It’s like diving down. In the past, you’ve been able to dive down for five minutes and you push yourself a little bit longer. This time, let’s try seven, let’s try eight. Fortunately, the difference here is that you’re not going to starve yourself of oxygen. But you will be starving the mind of its other entertainments and sensations. So you’re going to have to call those into question. So the ability to stay concentrated is not just a matter of being efficient at the technique, although that does play a role. The other part has to do with your values, how you can reason with yourself when the mind seems afraid to stick with something, or, on the other hand, if it gets kind of lazy. This is where you have to remind yourself that the principle of heedfulness is what underlies everything. As the Buddha said, “All skillful qualities are contained in heedfulness.” In the same way that the footprints of all the animals on earth can be contained in the footprint of the elephant. And there are benefits that come from mastering the skills of meditation. You may not be fully appreciating them yet, but you can cast back and remember. Have you seen people grow ill? Have you seen people get old? Have you seen people die? What was it like? One of the most chastening things about all of this is, especially if they’re people you love, you see them and you want to do something for them, but you realize there’s part of them that you can’t reach, especially as they’re approaching death. They’re dealing with a lot of very personal, inward stuff. And if they’ve been unskillful on that level, they’re going to be suffering a lot, and you can’t do much for them. You can try to create a good environment for them, but there’s always so much you can do. Well, you have that part in you as well, that part that nobody else can reach. Even the people who love you most dearly can’t get in there. When we’re meditating, we’re training that part, or developing skills that that part can really need and really use. We often don’t like thinking about serious things like this, but we have to. Nobody else is going to think about them for us. Nobody else can prepare us for them. We have to prepare ourselves. So the mind thinks, “Well, that’s enough concentration for now.” You can ask yourself, “Is it really enough? Suppose I were to die tonight?” Would I be ready to go? Or even issues that are a lot less drastic? How is my life going from day to day now? Am I able to put up with lots of unpleasant words, lots of physical pain, without getting upset? All too often what we take as normal is based on what we see around us. How other people handle things. We say, “Well, we’re handling better than most.” But it is possible to go through the day without suffering, without causing yourself any suffering, and not letting the words of other people or whatever physical pains or discomforts there are get to the mind. So heatfulness is a good motivator. And just that openness to the possibility that there may be a happiness that you haven’t tasted yet that’s better than anything you’ve had before. And you’re capable of it. Sometimes we talk ourselves out of practicing more because we say, “Well, I guess I’m just not up to this,” or, “I’m not talented at this,” or whatever. It sounds nice and humble, but it really does get in the way. So you do have to question your values when you find that you’ve run up against a wall in your concentration or mindfulness practice. And at the very least, give it a try to see if you can stay still longer, stay mindful longer. Our society is really adept at making us see things in little forms. Flashes jump from here to there, and all the quick cuts on TV. When I’m on planes now, I notice that TV shows seem to have a lot more frenetic energy to them than they used to. But that’s just so they can grab your attention. It’s not to be taken as a lesson on how you should run your own mind. We’re here for long tracking shots. Long cuts. And it’s helped when you’re open to the possibility that they could rearrange some of the things in your mind. Because that’s what the meditation is supposed to do.

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