Letting Go Strategically

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The path we practice is one of developing and letting go. In fact, the Pali term for meditation is bhavana, or to develop. But in developing qualities like concentration and discernment, we have to let go of quite a bit. And we have to let go strategically. It’s not that you just let go of everything. I think that takes care of the problem. Because there are a lot of things we’re holding onto that we don’t even see. And unfortunately, it’s not the case that you let go of the easy things first and then work your way up systematically and step by step to the hard things. Sometimes you have to let go of some pretty hard things just to get the mind to settle down. Because there are some things that you can let go of only when the mind has settled down. So whatever is required to get the mind to stay with what object, you’ve got to do it. Sometimes this means taking up other objects before you take up the breath. As I said, some people have a lot of anger, some people have a lot of lust, some people have a lot of delusion. And in cases like that, you may have to deal with some unpleasant topics first. For example, the lust and contemplating the parts of the body, the parts that we normally don’t like to think about, things that are inside our bodies, and what it would be like if the skin were peeled off, and the fact that it’s always there all the time, even when the skin is on. The Buddha admits that this is not a pleasant topic. But if your mind is preoccupied with lust, then you’ve got to work on that. Otherwise, the mind won’t be able to settle down. It’ll keep going back there, back there. As soon as everything is quiet, that’s where you want to go. The same with anger. Some people really feed off of anger and feed off of irritation. Before you get the mind to settle down, you’ve got to start spreading thoughts of goodwill or thoughts of equanimity. Whatever can soothe the irritation and help you see past it. Sometimes, it requires more than just a simple goodwill thought. You have to analyze things. Why are you stuck on something? And Chan Mahaprabhu has a good analogy for this. He says some people find it easy for their minds to settle down. It’s like cutting down a tree in the middle of a meadow. It doesn’t take much skill. You figure out which direction you want the tree to go, and you cut it. That’s it. In other cases, though, it’s like cutting down a tree in the middle of a forest. The tree has lots of branches that aren’t entangled with the branches of other trees. And there are only a few places where there’s an opening big enough for the tree to come down. So first you’ve got to cut the branches and get the tree to the size that it can fall down into the space that’s available. Cutting the branches, of course, means figuring out where your attachments are to things that are preventing you from being with the breath and staying with the breath. That requires some thought. So it’s not just that we’re sitting here lulling our minds into concentration. Sometimes it requires an active analysis. Where’s the problem? What’s keeping me from settling down? And look at that attachment until you can see that, at least for the time being, you can put it aside. That’s where you can develop your sense of priorities. What’s important? Keeping hold of that attachment. And sometimes it’s a quality of the mind that we’ve learned to value, this tenacity of grabbing onto something and not being willing to let it go. We’ve found in some cases in the past that it’s worked. It’s protected us from getting complacent, or it’s protected us from being exposed to danger. But what was a good habit to have in certain circumstances is not necessarily the habit you want to develop now. There are some things that are important in your life, but you’ve got to put them aside right now. Remind yourself that this is more important. You need to learn how to coach yourself this way. So if you’re dealing with lust or irritation, do what you can to cut through it, at least for the time being. Give yourself enough space so you can settle down and be with the breath. Because the breath is a really good place to develop as your home base. You can breathe in any way you want. Long, short, fast, slow, shallow, deep. Any rhythm you like, any texture you like. It’s one of the few processes in the body that you do have under your control. So learn how to use that fact to create a good, comfortable place to stay. Because the sense of comfort is going to help you. Because in the next stage you want to learn how to protect that. Learn how to create that sense of comfort and to be alert at the same time. Use it to spread through the body. So you have a good sense of wanting to inhabit the body here in the present moment. It feels good, it feels soothing, it feels nourishing. Just that fact in and of itself helps you stick with the concentration. But don’t think of this just as a breath break that you then leave when you get up from the cushion or get up from the meditation seat and go outside. Try to take it with you. Because the breath, of course, is with you and you can work with the breath at any time. Because you need it as your foundation when other issues come up. It’s not the case that the mind has trouble settling down only when it’s trying to be still. You go outside and you start talking with people, dealing with other people, and all of a sudden you find yourself feeling anger again, or feeling lost again, or feeling fear. And you need the breath as your foundation to deal with these things. And the fact that it’s soothing, you know, puts you in a better mood. John Sawat once made the observation that there’s a paradoxical quality to a mind that’s well-concentrated. On the one hand, it’s solid and tough. When you’re firmly settled, you don’t get budged around by anything. But at the same time, he said, it’s very gentle in the sense of being sensitive to things. And you want to take advantage of both those qualities, the toughness and not letting yourself get budged by your anger or someone else’s anger, your greed, their greed, your lust, their lust, your fear, their fear. You don’t want to be moved by these things. But at the same time, you want to be sensitive when they come up, especially when they come up in you. What’s triggering them? The stillness of the concentration helps you see these things. That sense of well-being helps you admit to things that otherwise you may not want to see, that you don’t want to admit about yourself. There’s a lot of motivation sneaking around in the mind. And the reason they sneak is because they know if they’re exposed to the light of day, they’ll be very embarrassing. So ignorance is not just a matter of not knowing. Sometimes we actively cover things up inside ourselves. And so the concentration is here. It can provide a good foundation for your discernment, both in the sense of being still enough to see movement when it happens. Because if the mind is moving all the time, then other things will kind of move along with it, and you won’t even see them. They’re following in your footsteps. But if you’re not walking, they have no footsteps to follow. And then when they move, you should be able to see them. And it’s the soothing quality of the concentration that allows you to admit to yourself, “Oh, there’s that motive or this motive that I don’t like to admit to myself.” That’s when the concentration really shows its value. These are among the hardest things to let go of. The motivations that you hide from yourself, the walls you put up in the mind to protect these things, and the stillness of the concentration. The concentration and the sense of well-being make it easier to be able to take some of those walls down and to catch yourself. When anger comes up, what really sparks it? Who are you really angry at? When fear comes up, what are you afraid of? Or sometimes when anger comes up, what are you afraid of? When fear comes up, what are you angry about? It’s not that these things come in teams when everybody’s wearing the same jersey. So whatever needs to be let go of so you can get the mind to settle down, do it. Whether it’s easy or it’s hard, you’ve got to adopt this strategy of giving the mind a good, solid, and comfortable place to stay, and then learning how to protect it. So you can take the skills you learn while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, and you can use them anywhere. Because, after all, your breath is with you everywhere. Your present awareness is with you everywhere. Learn to make the most of them. And get a good sense of what needs to be held onto so that you can let go of the things that need to be let go of. And you hold on to the concentration for quite a while. So get familiar with it. Get so that you like it. So it’s a stable place to stay, tough enough not to be moved around, and gentle enough so that you can see what’s happening, sensitive enough so you can see what’s happening. So that even the tough things to let go of can be overcome. You finally see through them, and you’ll understand why they’re worth letting go.

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