Training Your Observer

January 20, 2014

John Lee has an image for how alertness functions in the practice. He says it’s like a rope on a pulley that you pull back and forth. There are two things you’ve got to be alert to. One is what’s going on with the breath, and the other is being alert to the fact whether the mind is actually staying with the breath or not. You’ve got to keep watch on both sides. Because you can be with the breath, but if you’re not watching the mind, all of a sudden you’re off someplace else. And you don’t even know that it’s happened. So have this dual focus here. You’re with the mind, you’re with the breath. Keep watching over both of them. Moving back a little bit, back and forth between the two of them, eventually they get together and they become one. And then it becomes a lot easier. But in the beginning, you’ve got to keep both eyes open. Then mindfulness comes in to remind you what you’ve got to do. Right now, unfortunately, there’s not much you’ve got to do. Just stay here with the breath. And if you wander off, just come right back. Any thoughts that come up that are not related to the breath are totally irrelevant right now. You don’t have to get involved. They’re not your duty right now. This is your duty, in line with the basic duties of the Four Noble Truths, which is to develop concentration as part of the path. Mindfulness is what keeps these various duties and shoulds in mind. Just talk about the shoulds that you carry around with you as your superego that’s always watching over you, telling you what’s right and what’s wrong. A lot of people’s shoulds are pretty oppressive. Fortunately, the Buddhist shoulds basically have your best interests in mind. You want to find true happiness. That’s what he wants to help you with. These are the shoulds that go with the desire to find true happiness. As I said, at the moment, the shoulds are pretty easy. They’re one set. Develop concentration so you can let go of anything else that gets in the way of the concentration. Now, there will be other times as you’re dealing with other people, dealing with daily life, that other shoulds come in. Should you talk? Should you not talk? Should you get involved? Should you not get involved? Now the principles get a little bit more complicated, but not that much. There’s a passage where the Buddha has a list of three questions he has you ask yourself before you’re going to speak. And the same three questions apply to your thoughts. First, is it true? If it’s true, then it goes to the next question. Is it beneficial? Is something going to be accomplished by thinking about these things? Or speaking about these things? And the third question is, is this the right time and place? Because some things might be true and beneficial, but it’s not the right time and place, and then they become unskillful speech or, in our case right now, unskillful thoughts. Right now, the only thinking you’ve got to do is thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath, making sure you’re alert both to the breath and to the mind. Any other thoughts? No matter how interesting or creative or insistent they may be, they’re not what you want right now. You’re working on a basic skill—how to get yourself out of those other thought worlds and inhabit this thought world. It’s like learning boxing. The first step to teach you is how to retreat. In what situations you get into, you have to know how to back off if things get really bad. So they work on retreating in a way that doesn’t expose you. So here we’re learning how to pull out of thought worlds. Any thought world comes up, and first order of business, how do I step back from it as quickly and as effectively as possible? There is some work that goes on here, and sometimes it seems pretty tedious. The thought keeps coming, you keep saying, “No.” It comes again, you say, “No.” But after a while, you get better at it, more effective. As I said this afternoon, you want to learn where the jugular of these various thoughts are, and go straight for that. So greed comes up and you knock it out. Of course, it’s not going to die. You’re just knocking it out for the time being so you have some space to do some work. Anger comes up. Fear comes up. You want to learn how to sidestep them, just get them out of your way for the time being, so you have some space to get the mind to settle down and find a sense of well-being right here. This sense of well-being is your nourishment on the path. When the Buddha talks about the different factors of the practice, he compares them to a fortress. Your energy or your effort he compares to soldiers. Your learning of the Dhamma he compares to weapons. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper of the fortress, who learns how to recognize who to let in and who not to let in. Otherwise, you’re not just sitting there watching unjudgmentally as the enemy sneaks in. You’ve got to keep them out. That’s the duty of mindfulness, to remember who’s to be trusted and who’s not. Of course, the gatekeeper and the soldiers need food, and that’s what concentration provides. It’s nourishment. Mindfulness strengthens our effort by providing this food for the mind, the food of rapture, the food of pleasure. So you need to be able to clear out a space in your mind where the thoughts are not invading and not bothering you, so you can get the sense of a good, calm, and refreshing center. Because our mindfulness and our effort do need that nourishment. Sometimes we learn about things that would be helpful, but then we forget them. We usually forget them right at the moment where we really need them. So this is why you need to strengthen your mindfulness. Or we can remember them, but we don’t have the energy to carry them through. This is where the concentration provides. It provides energy and strength. So whatever work is required to create this sense of a good, solid center inside, be willing to do that work. The practice is not all letting go. Sometimes there’s some work, sometimes there’s development. After all, the practice is something fabricated. The path is fabricated. It takes energy. But you’ve got to learn how to think strategically. There are some things you’ve got to hold on to in order to let go of the things that really are unskillful in the mind and to let go effectively. You’ve got to build the things that are worth holding on to. Of course, concentration as a state of becoming in the mind is critical. There’s going to be a sense of you in here during the concentration, but you want it to be a healthy you. We’re not dropping every sense of self, wherever it may be. We’re encouraging the skillful ones. I think one of the problems in our society is that most people have very few physical skills or few manual skills. The people who have those skills tend to be more balanced. They tend to be more mature. They’ve learned how to apply themselves. They’ve learned how to cultivate the kind of desire to do something well that actually does produce good results. In other words, the desire doesn’t go into extreme swings of just wanting, wanting, wanting, but not actually doing the work, or then giving up and not wanting anything at all. You’ve got to learn to have just the right amount of desire so that it keeps you working in the right way and doesn’t push you so hard that you wear out. This requires a certain amount of maturity. Again, the observer, the alert part of the mind that knows how to watch things and bring them into balance. And that observer becomes another new self in your stable of selves. And as you’re training here, it becomes a more skillful one, wiser, knows how to think strategically. So try to develop this quality of alertness, watching what’s going on and then putting it together with mindfulness and the ardency of your effort. These are the three qualities that underlie all mindfulness and concentration practice. These three qualities go into creating a skillful observer, this skillful sense of self that can help manage the path and manage all your other selves. So when the desire comes to speak and think, or in the outside world, you’ve got this observer that’s going to be able to give you some good input into the process. Is it true? Is it skillful? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time? Having a solid center makes you more patient. This may not be the right time and place for saying what you want to say, but you file it away and say, “Okay, the time will come.” And then when the time does come and you say what you wanted to say, you find it’s a lot more effective, rather than just blurting things out when you want to or because you feel like it. So again, you learn how to think strategically. Just like a skilled craftsman. When they make furniture, they put pencil marks on the wood. Now, of course, you don’t want pencil marks on the furniture when it’s done, but you need to put pencil marks there when you’re doing it. The time will come when you erase them, sand them off. So there will come a time when this observer gets sanded off. But in the meantime, you really need it. So don’t be too quick to sand it away.

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