Gradual & Sudden

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Turning the mind is like fixing scrambled eggs. Not that you’re trying to scramble it, but it takes time. If you turn the heat up too high, you’ll burn the eggs, or they’ll turn tough. If you don’t put any heat on it at all, it just sits there on the pan, and after a while it’ll spoil. You put them over low heat and you just keep stirring and stirring and stirring, and for a long time nothing seems to be happening. And if you take it off the burner to check them again, okay, that slows the process down. If you try to turn up the heat again, you’ll get fast results, but they’re not what you want. So it requires patience and a trust in the process. The instructions are very simple. Stay with the breath. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Keep watching over the relationship between the mind and the breath to make sure that it’s just right. It’ll take a while to get a sense of what “just right” is, but that’s how you develop your discernment. They talk about the path being sudden and gradual, and there used to be a big argument as to whether it was sudden or gradual, but it’s actually both. It’s sudden in the sense that when insights come, they clear things up immediately. The image that John Sowat liked to use was of a light. You carry a light into a dark place and it’s automatically bright inside, and the darkness doesn’t have any right to say, “Well, I’ve been here for aeons and aeons,” and you have no right to bring the light in. As soon as the light comes in, the darkness goes away. That’s the suddenness of the insight. But for the discernment to have that kind of sudden and penetrative and liberating quality, you have to work at developing it. Developing this sense of “just right” is an important part of that. How much pressure do you put on the meditation so that you can maintain it, even as you’re walking around, as you’re chanting, as you’re eating, cleaning up? What’s the kind of focus that you can maintain? In all activities, we’ll try to keep that focus going. You’ll find that different incidents or different situations in the day will require different levels of concentration. While you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, you don’t have to worry about moving the body around. You don’t have to worry about what other people are thinking. All you have to worry about is getting the mind totally with the breath, giving yourself to what you’re doing right here, right now. At other times in the day, the breath becomes your foundation as you’re engaged in other activities. But you want to have that sense of being with the breath and sticking with the breath all the time. Otherwise, it’s like taking the pan off the heat and the eggs don’t coagulate. There are a lot of other images they use in Thailand to remind you that this is a process that’s going to take time. One is of planting rice plants. You’re worried that the plants aren’t growing fast enough, so you pull on them to make them grow faster. Of course, what that does is it uproots the plants and then they die. You focus on nourishing the plants, looking after them, and let the process continue. Let the process take care of itself. So be very clear on what it is that’s going to nourish the plant of your concentration. There’s conviction that this really is going to work, and this really is important. It’s worth putting as much attention and sensitivity and dedication into the process as you can. It’s going to pay off. In the beginning, it doesn’t seem like that, because the results aren’t happening as fast as you’d like. But you’ve got to have the conviction that this is how the great Ajahns in the past, the great meditators in the past, how they did it. The human mind is not that different. We may have differences in our language and our culture, but greed, aversion, and delusion look the same throughout the world. Then they do the same things to the mind, and so the cure for these things is always going to be the same. So you have to have conviction that this is how it works. The Buddha really was awakened. He really did know how to put an end to suffering. You have that conviction. This carries you through a lot of dry patches. And then there’s persistence. You just stick with it all the time, all the time, all the time. There are no vacations. When I first went to Thailand, that was the first thing that struck me about life as a monk. You didn’t have weekends off. You didn’t have evenings off. You were a monk all day, all week, all year. So what that meant was you have to pace yourself like a long-distance runner. If you run as fast as you can, you end up falling behind. You don’t even reach the end. So you keep going, going, going. Find a rhythm that allows you to keep going. You don’t wander off to side trails. You just stick with it. You’ve got to keep in mind that this is really important. That’s what mindfulness does. It keeps reminding you what you should be doing and how best to do it. It’s called the Governing Principle. In other words, it keeps you on track, reminding you to stay with the breath, reminding you to stay with the quality of your awareness here in the present moment. The mind does have this funny tendency to shrink itself and go into little thought worlds. It can travel from one to the next, to the next, to the next, just like hopping trains. It’s in complete ignorance of what it’s doing to its own quality of awareness. So that’s one of the things you’ve got to keep in mind all the time. How is your awareness right now? Does it fill the body? Is there a sense of belonging here in the present moment? Try to keep that in mind. And when something comes up, and this is what the teachings on mindfulness are all about, you have your framework for labeling what’s going on so you know what to do with it. If craving comes up, what do you do with that? Are you supposed to abandon it? How do you abandon it? First, you have to understand how it’s causing suffering. And you have to understand why you like it, even though it’s causing suffering or stress. And when you understand it, when you let go through understanding both what the appeal was and also what the drawbacks are, that’s when you really can let go of things. It’s like a bad habit you have that, as long as it offers some little scrap of pleasure, you’re going to stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. But when you look at it long enough to realize, “Guys, this is not helping. It’s not worth the effort that goes into it,” when you see it with that kind of understanding, then you can let it go. So mindfulness is there to remind you of these lessons. In this way, the mind gets into concentration. This is where the real nourishment, the real strengthening of the mind, comes, by staying here. And you’re staying here with alertness. It’s not just like you’re zoning out. You don’t learn anything from zoning out. You learn from being still. You’re catching the slightest things that come out of the mind that are going to pull you away. That’s how your discernment gets more and more refined. There are two suttas in the Canon that are very interesting because they follow the same pattern. One talks about the most basic level of practice. It’s the Buddha teaching his son about looking at his actions to see if he anticipates any harm and not to do it. While he’s doing something, if he sees any harm coming up, he stops. If you see no harm, then you go ahead and do it. Finish it. When you’re done, you look at the long-term results. And if you see that you caused any harm, you go talk it over with someone who’s also on the path and get their advice so that the next time around you don’t have to cause that harm. That’s the instruction to a son, seven years old. There’s another time where he’s talking about very refined levels of concentration, and it’s the same kind of instruction. Look at what you’re doing. Where are you causing the slightest disturbance in the mind? At this level, when the concentration is really good, it’s usually just a little rise and fall in the level of disturbance. As soon as the disturbance or disease or sense of being a little bit burdened by your practice rises, ask yourself, “What thought just went through the mind?” What were you doing just now that you weren’t doing before? If there’s a perception that has brought that level of stress up, okay, you drop the perception. If there’s not, then you learn to appreciate the stillness that’s there so that you become more sensitive to it, and that allows you to see the slightest disturbance that comes up again. It’s basically the same instruction, it’s just more refined. This is how concentration leads into discernment. All these are things that strengthen the quality of your mind. When you bring these qualities to the practice, then it’s going to grow. And whether it grows fast or slow is not the issue. And John Lee makes a nice comparison. He says, “Some people’s practice is like banana trees. You cut off the stem of a banana tree and it’ll grow, and you come back and it’ll be back in an hour and it’s already had a little shoot come out for another couple inches.” It’s fast, but banana trees don’t last very long. It’s the big trees that take a long time to grow. Those are the ones that are really going to give you shade. So you learn how to look after them. Even though they seem little tiny shoots that don’t promise much, you’ve probably seen the seeds to redwood trees. They’re the tiniest little seeds, and yet they can grow into redwood trees if they’ve got the right conditions. So the practice requires steadiness and it requires sensitivity. And if you’re not seeing anything happening in the practice, you’re not looking carefully enough. And to look carefully requires that the mind get quiet. And you learn how not to take anything for granted. There are lots of movements in the mind that are very ordinary. Well, it’s these ordinary things that are causing the trouble. So try to bring fresh eyes to your practice. And keep bringing fresh eyes. That’s how it grows. That’s how your sensitivity develops so that the gradual path suddenly leads to something sudden, a sudden understanding, a sudden seeing. The things you’re seeing are nowhere else. They’re right here all the time. It’s just that your sensitivity isn’t sharp enough. So learn to be more sensitive. A lot of the training in the forest tradition is just like this. A lot of times the teacher doesn’t tell you what to do, even on basic levels. He wants you to observe for yourself that when other people in the group are doing something, this is how they do it. And you’re meant to look and listen carefully, instead of just barging right in. You have to look at the things, the messages that people are sending with their body language, with their expressions, the way they do things that you didn’t see before. It’s the same way with the meditation. The mind is doing its thing all the time. It has the cause of stress in here, and it has stress in here. And every now and then there are some elements that are the path leading to the end of stress. They’re all in here. But if you just take everything for granted, nothing grows, nothing develops. So keep your gaze steadily right here, and keep it fresh. Try to be as sensitive as possible. That’s how the insights arise.

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