No Big Deal

July 18, 2014

We follow a path that starts with right view and goes through right concentration. John Fuehn used to translate the word “right” as “just right.” In other words, our views are just right for what we need to do. Our resolves are just right for the task that lies ahead of us, where we are on the path. And, of course, being just right means that it’s something you’ve got to practice. It’s almost impossible that when you’re doing anything at all that you’re going to get it just right from the very beginning. Sometimes it’ll be too much, sometimes too little. But even when you do it just right, there’s the added problem that you finally say, “Ah, at last!” You want to pat yourself on the back, or you want to have somebody pat you on the back. And in the course of patting yourself on the back, you fall off the path again. When things don’t go well, you get depressed and decide that you can’t do this. It’s beyond you. That’s not right either. It’s normal that we go off the path either way this way, but over time you should try to learn how to get closer and closer to staying on so that even when you do things right, you don’t get so taken with your rightness that you stop doing them. And when you do things wrong, you don’t get so depressed or discouraged by the fact that you made a mistake. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back to work. This is something that comes with time. But it’s not just time. It’s learning how to observe yourself and being quick to sense when you’ve added a little bit too much. Or not enough, and learning how to adjust things back. So the important thing is that once you’ve fallen off the path, you don’t get discouraged either way. Just remember, it’s a hard path to stay on. It’s right down the middle of the road. And there may be a little bit of weaving back and forth. You think more of an acrobat going down a high wire. They don’t just float straight across down the wire. You see them leaning a little bit here, leaning a little bit there, and they learn how to correct. And here’s where the quality of alertness comes in. The ability to watch your mind at the same time that you’re watching the object of your meditation. You might think of your mind as one spot and the object as another spot, and alertness is what connects the two. And what you’re trying to do is pull the two closer and closer together. That’s what evaluation is about. You’re trying to figure out what object is the object the mind needs right now. Because getting the mind to settle down is not just a mechanical process or a technical process. You have to look at your own emotions, too. Where are your emotions pulling you off in the wrong direction right now? And what are the correctives? And John Lee talks often about how the process of concentration requires that you think about things in a way that gives rise to a sense of sanghuega. And it’s the sanghuega that lets you drop all your distractions. So it’s not just force of will that you’re going to stay here. There comes a sense of understanding. An attitude, an emotion, that makes you want to stay with the object. So what object do you want to stay with? There are lots that the Buddha has to offer in addition to the breath, which is basically home base. Because it’s through getting in touch with the breath, getting grounded with the breath, that you can deal with others. If you see there’s some reason why you’re not willing to settle down with the breath, ask yourself, “What’s the reason? What’s going on in the mind?” And you can use any of the other topics that the Buddha recommends. Contemplation of death is good for complacency, laziness. Contemplation of the parts of the body is good for all kinds of things. Not only for lust, but also just for an overweening concern for your body. Realizing how much you do in life that it’s just simply to keep the body going. And what have you got? You’ve just got all these parts of the body, none of which have any real substance. And thinking about that can often be a good way to get the mind just to settle right down, through that sense of sanghuega. Of course, with good will. Good will is not just beating your head where the idea that I’ve got to have good will for everybody or just repeating phrases over and over again. You think about having good will for all beings. Start with people who are close to your heart, then you expand it out and ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there whose happiness I have trouble wishing for? Anybody else out there that I’d actually like to see suffer a little bit?” And you can think of a few people. So you ask yourself, “Why? What would I gain from their suffering? What would the world gain from their suffering?” And the part of the mind that would like to see them suffering, is that something you really want to encourage? Wouldn’t the world be a much better place if everybody could find true happiness inside? They wouldn’t be oppressing one another. They wouldn’t be nasty to one another, abusing one another. So you can keep on testing to see if there’s anybody else that you have trouble feeling good will for until you finally get to the point where you’ve sorted all that out. So it’s not just a repeating of a phrase. There’s some active thinking that goes on, but it’s ground-clearing action that helps the mind to settle down in the realization that you don’t have any ill will for anybody at all. You look all around you and there’s nobody that you feel ill will for. Just having that state of mind can be a great relief. So look at your state of mind right now to see if there’s anybody that you need. And think about the different topics the Buddha offers for you to choose. Which one do you think you could tie your mind to and then gradually get them closer and closer together? Because what you want eventually is a sense of oneness. What do they call it in Pali? Eko di pava, the unification of awareness where the mind and the object are one. You’ve had that pulley that goes back and forth between the mind and the object and they get closer and closer and closer together until they become one. And do this often enough so that it doesn’t become a miracle. The first time you settle down and things really do get one like that, it’s obvious that you’re going to be happy about it and then you spill everything. You’ve fallen off the high wire. Fortunately, there’s a safety net. You can get back on. And with practice, you find you can do it more and more efficiently and it becomes less and less of a big deal. If you’re going to know when things go well, wait till the end of the meditation and ask yourself when the mind finally did settle down with a sense of snugness with the object. How were you breathing? What had you done? Up to that point, where were you focused? What was the breath like? Try to get a sense of how it felt to be there. Then see if you can recreate that felt sense the next time. If you can’t, start back at the beginning and go through the steps again. You do it often enough, and if you’re observant enough, you begin to notice, “Okay, this is how the mind settles down most efficiently.” And once it’s there, this is how it stays there until it becomes no big deal. That sense of no big deal, that’s a really important part of being just right.

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