Concentrating Work

July 22, 2014

We’ve been having a stretch of very nice weather, and tomorrow it’s supposed to heat up. Have you trained your mind so that when the heat comes, you’re not going to suffer? There’s a passage in the Canon, it’s one that King Ashoka even recommended that the monks and nuns listen to every day. It talks about a monk going out in the forest and realizing that he could get sick, he could die, all kinds of things could happen in the forest. Some thieves might run across him and decide that he’s a dangerous person to have around. And the monk is supposed to ask himself, “Am I ready for that? If not, there’s work to be done. Have I reached the attainment that will allow me to dwell at ease?” Of course, mentally dwell at ease even when old, even when sick, even when dying, even when people are ready to beat him up. The heat is not quite that bad, but it’s a good test case. Can you sit there and not complain to yourself about the heat? Can you do what you can to keep cool? But there’s only so much we can do. We don’t have air conditioning, we don’t have a lot of the conveniences that other people have. I’m always amazed at people who live in air conditioning and they complain about the heat. So are you ready? There’s work to be done. The word kamatthana literally means “your occupation.” As a meditator, this is your occupation, training the mind, working your field here of four jhanas. Four elements or six elements. What you’ve got here in the body, what you’ve got here in the mind, potentials you have here in the mind. There’s work to be done to develop them. And John Lee points out that as we’re trying to get the mind to settle down, the work is done by direct thought and evaluation. In other words, you work at keeping your mind with your object. And you try to get better and better at evaluating how the mind is fitting with the object, what you can do to adjust the object to fit the mind, what you can do to adjust the mind to fit the object. That’s your work. The pleasure will come, the rapture will come, when you do your work well. Most of us don’t like to think about meditation as work. It’s a nice place to rest and have some time off from our regular duties. A lot of people use it as stress reduction. Well, that resting is a work. It’s an important part of the meditation. But we rest so that we have the strength to do our work. Why is it that the mind keeps creating suffering for itself? Where does it place a burden on itself? How is it thinking in ways and visualizing things to itself? The place of burden on it, and in placing a burden on the mind, you find you’re putting a squeeze on your thoughts, your words and deeds, and that puts a squeeze on other people. That’s the responsible work we’re doing here, not just learning how to deal with the heat, but learning how to deal with whatever difficulties come up and learn how to take them in stride. You want the mind quiet so you can watch what it’s doing when it’s just spinning thoughts on its own, so you can step back from your thoughts. So when you’re complaining about how hot it is outside, “Why didn’t we bring in electricity so we can have air conditioning,” or whatever, you say, “Well, that’s not the way things are right here. We want to live off the grid.” This is one of the prices of living off the grid. But it’s a good chance to practice patience, a good chance to see the mind chattering to itself and creating all kinds of trouble, totally without need. As in a John Charles famous comment, it’s not that the sound out there is bothering you, you’re bothering the sound. It’s the same way with the heat. It’s not so much the heat’s bothering you, you’re bothering the heat. You’re bothering your own mind over the heat. It’s similar to when there’s pain. If you think about how long you’ve been in pain, and how much longer you’re going to be in pain, you’re placing a totally unnecessary burden on the present moment. The mind can handle the pain it’s feeling right now, as long as it’s not worrying about how long it’s going to be continuing to feel pain or is not lamenting over how long it’s been. We find that we can wear ourselves out so easily. An important part of endurance is learning how not to burden yourself. Not unnecessarily. Focus on the things that are giving you strength rather than the things that are taking your strength away. We want to learn some mental skills. So even when situations are difficult, and things probably can get a lot worse than just having a heat wave, but we want the mind in a position where it’s not weighing itself down unnecessarily so it can deal with situations as they arise and handle them well. That’s our work. So evaluate your breath. Evaluate your thinking about the breath. This is how the evaluation gets better. It evaluates itself. In other words, you check on how things are going. You make a few adjustments and you say, “Well, how did that work?” Think about the breath going through the different parts of the body. Where is it flowing well? Where is it not flowing well? The breath is totally independent of whether it’s hot outside or cool outside. But you can find that there are centers of coolness in the body, so you focus on those if you need them. Just as on mornings when it’s really cold, you try to find the warm spot inside. Look for your sources of strength. Build on your strengths. And notice when you’re engaging in activities that are just wearing yourself down. The Buddha taught about two different types of suffering or stress. There’s the stress of change, the inconstancy, the fact that things are dependent on conditions and the conditions have to be held together with a certain amount of tension for them to continue, and then they finally break apart. And if you’re trying to build any happiness on that, it’s going to crash. That’s the second thing. You’re trying to build happiness on these things. That’s the second kind of suffering. That comes out of ignorance. It comes out of lack of skill. Out of the lack of skill comes craving, and that’s what makes us suffer, the clinging. The things that are going to disappoint us. And the act of clinging itself places a burden on the mind. The first kind of stress is the stress of the three characteristics. The second kind is the stress of the four noble truths. That’s what we’re here to solve. That’s what we’re here to work on. And the first thing we need to see is that it’s not necessary. You’re piling it on yourself. And if you develop your skills at directed thought and evaluation, you can begin to see that this is where I’m doing it, this is why I’m doing it, and this is why I don’t have to. And then you can stop. As long as you don’t see yourself doing these things, you can’t stop them. They seem to be just kind of a part of the background, like the noise of the crickets or the rumble of the cars down on the highway. It’s a given, we think, but an important part of the meditation is learning what’s given and what’s not. What’s the result of past actions? Are things just kind of coming up on their own? And what are you adding? And again, it’s only through using your directed thought and evaluation that you begin to sort these things out. By changing what you’re adding right now, at least to what you can consciously change. And as you’re consciously changing some of the mind’s input, you begin to notice other things the mind has been doing. You catch them out of the corner of your eye. That’s how you chip away at this tendency to add a lot of unnecessary stress. And this is our work. We’re doing it in well-being. We’re doing it quietly. But it is work in the sense that it requires a lot of alertness and a lot of attention. But the results more than reward the effort put in.

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