Value What You’ve Got

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Once, when Ajahn Fuen was teaching in Wat Makud in Bangkok, one of his students came to report that the day before she had been meditating with him, her mind had gotten really calm and quiet. So quiet and comfortable that even when she left meditation there was still a sense of that same ease and well-being inside. She went home and started talking to a friend who started to gossip with her about something. She found bit by bit that the mood changed, and by the end of the conversation she was in a foul mood. After she told this to Ajahn Fuen, he said, “You took gold and you traded it for shit.” This is what happens all too often when we meditate. The mind gets nice and calm, and then the bell rings and the time gets up, and you just get up and throw it away. Go off, do something else, and then find that when you come back, it’s not there. You have to create it all over again. This relates to a really important part of right effort, which is that once you’ve got something good, you keep it going. For a lot of us, we think that that means we’ve got to move on to the next step or the next step. But before you can move on to the next step, you’ve got to get really solid in where you are. You’ve got to get to know this particular stage of concentration and get really familiar with it. Otherwise, when you step onto the next stage, you’re just stepping onto your own conceptions and your guesses as to what it should be. Think of the Buddha’s image of the foolish, inexperienced cow. She’s on this hillside. There’s nice grass and there’s nice water. But she looks across the ravine, and there’s another meadow over on that side. And she wonders, “What’s the grass like over there? What’s the water like over there?” So she tries to go down to the ravine, but because she’s not skilled in going down the ravine, she gets stuck. And then she can’t even get back to where she was to begin with, much less get over to the other side. So it’s important, once you’ve got the mind in concentration, that you don’t try to jump to the next level or to decide that you’ve suddenly got to do insight practice. If some interesting visions and things come up, you don’t want to go there either, because you have to learn how to maintain what’s worth maintaining. You have to learn how to recognize what’s worth maintaining. Because that’s a lot of where that next level is. Figure out what you have to do in order to stay in concentration, but what you can let go of so the concentration gets more refined, involves less activity, and creates greater and greater stillness in the mind. So don’t jump at the next step. Stay where you are. And if a voice inside says, “Well, this is dumb. Nothing’s happening,” learn how to recognize that. Recognize that as just the voice of boredom. But you don’t have to be bored. Keep the voice something separate, and tell it, “I’m here learning a skill, and it’s going to require some time.” So you go away, and you stay right here. And try to figure out what it means to stay balanced and what it means to stay balanced in one spot, without feeling the need to go someplace else. Because after all, the concentration, you’re not going to be crossing a ravine at all. You’re going to be staying right here and just getting to know deeper and deeper into this area. Or if you’re to make another comparison, it’s like having a fruit on a tree. You don’t pick it from this branch and move it over to another branch, and then move it to another branch. You keep it on this branch and just water it and look after it and let it ripen at whatever pace it’s going to take. If you try to push it too much, you spoil it. If you don’t feed it enough, you also spoil it. So you have to learn a sense of just right. A standard image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. You don’t want to hold it too tight because otherwise it’ll die. You don’t want to hold it too loosely or it’ll fly away. So find just the right amount of pressure and then learn how to maintain that steadily. You’ve got to show some commitment here. As you get more skilled at it, it’ll take less effort. It’s like steering a sailboat. The first time you’re out, you sense the sailboat is not going quite where you want it to, and so you push hard on the rudder and flip the whole thing over. So the next time when you come out, you have to figure out what’s just the right amount of pressure on the rudder so the sailboat stays steady and also goes where you want it to go. And how do you learn that? You learn that over time, and you learn it by being observant. In this way, by tending to these things, each breath, each breath, each breath, without trying to figure out ahead of time what the next breath is going to be like, or what the next five minutes are going to be like, or whatever. Just maintain what you’ve got. And in the maintaining, you find that it grows. This is the fourth of the right exertions. Once skillful quality has arisen, you try to cultivate it, you try to develop it. Until you can take it to the ultimate of its culmination. But the mind has its own rhythms. It has its own pace. So you look after it. It’ll do its developing without you having to try to figure things out ahead of time too much. Just notice what’s required to keep it balanced, and ask a few questions every now and then. “Is there any unnecessary stress in here? What is the mind doing that’s too active?” If you find that it’s not active enough, that’s when the concentration will leave, when the mind will leave concentration. But sometimes it’s overly active. In other words, it’s trying to protect something that doesn’t need to be protected quite so much anymore. In other words, you start out by thinking about the breath and evaluating it. This is verbal fabrication. And that’s how you run a little fence around the breath and run a little fence around the mind to make sure the mind doesn’t go wandering off. But after a while, once the mind is settled in with the breath and is one with it, you don’t have to keep running the fence around it. Then we can let that activity go and settle even more deeply into the breath. It’s organic, but it requires patience and it requires that you be observant and that you value what you’ve got. All too often we overlook the value of concentration because nothing’s happening. We think, “Well, this isn’t doing anything.” But you can think of it as like a cream you put on a rash on your skin. You put the cream on the rash and you look at it, and it doesn’t seem to be doing anything. It just sits there. What you can’t see is the chemical reaction between the cream and the skin. But if you’ve had experience with cream and skin, you know it takes a while. You put the cream on, you let it stay, and it’ll do its work, whether you see the skin and the cream reacting or not. You just learn how to maintain what you’ve got, even though it doesn’t seem to be doing anything. After a while, when you’ve had experience with it, you realize, “Okay, there’s something going on there. It just takes time.” It’s like making scrambled eggs. You put it over very low heat and just stir and stir and stir, and for a long time it seems like nothing’s happening. But if you turn up the heat, you don’t get good scrambled eggs, you get rubber. So you’ve got to keep it on a low heat and just keep stirring and stirring with the conviction that it will finally coagulate. And that’s how you get the consistency you want.

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