Be More Alert

February 3, 2015

When the Buddha talks about alertness, it’s not just a matter of being in the present moment. There’s a focus. The focus has to be on what you’re doing and the results that are coming from that. Most of us think we know what we’re doing. But if we really knew what we were doing, we wouldn’t be experiencing any suffering. So as long as there’s stress, as long as there’s any kind of dis-ease in the mind, you’ve got to look more carefully at what you’re doing. That’s what mindfulness is for. It reminds you, okay, you’re not really seeing everything. How do you see things carefully? It’s the same as listening to far-distant music. You’ve got to make yourself very, very quiet. So at least the parts of the mind that you are aware of as being in action, as having intentions, everybody is working together, everybody is still. So what’s your intention right now? Part of it is to stay with the breath, and part of it may be something else. So try to sort that out first until you get to the point where you feel that everybody on the committee, at least all the committee members you know about, are on board. You want to be here with the breath. If there’s a member that’s holding out for a little bit of candy right now, say, “Well, let’s work with the breath in a way that’s comfortable.” This is how you develop your powers of evaluation, because the evaluation is the discernment here. I think I’ve mentioned several times before that one of the interesting things about Ajahn Lee’s analysis of mindfulness is that for him, the discernment factor in mindfulness practice is in the ardency. You want to do this well. Because once you’ve set that up as an intention, then you have something to measure your actions against and measure the results of your actions against. If there’s nothing to do, nothing to attain, nowhere to focus, there’s no way to measure anything. You’re stuck in a sensory deprivation tank where everything is kind of blurry. But if you want to stay well with the breath, that gives you an idea, something to measure your mind against. So you can figure out if you’re micromanaging things too much or not enough. In other words, you can see the results of your actions right there in the breath. And if you’re not really clear about what you’re doing right now that’s causing a problem, just step back and say, “Okay, I’m not consciously going to do anything with the breath.” See what it does on its own. And of course, what it’s doing on its own usually has some minor functionary in your inner bureaucracy here that’s been running things for a while. But as long as everything you know that you’re doing consciously is just very, very quiet, you can see that. So even though this is a very proactive approach, it doesn’t mean that you’re always in there meddling. Sometimes you have to step back and see what else is going on. What undercurrents, what other factors of the mind are taking over. You can sense this very clearly when you’re sick, that a large part of your brain is suddenly not accessible to you. And why is that? It’s because your immune system is using a lot of your energy. There’s a lot of intelligence that goes on into fighting off, say, an illness or dealing with an injury. And you come to realize how much of your brain is functioning independently of you. But when you’re ill, sometimes it’s hard to see things clearly because your focus is difficult. So try to do this while you’re healthy. Focus on getting very, very still and then watching what else is going on. And because you’re ardent, then you have something to measure the results against. Is the breath as comfortable as you like? Is the mind behaving? What could be better? Pose that question. Don’t be too quick to jump to an answer. See what comes up and then try things out. This is the other part of evaluation. It’s really important. It’s your willingness to try things, even when you’re not sure. There are plenty of things in the Buddhist teachings where he says, “Do this, don’t do that.” But there’s a lot in the meditation where it’s left up to you to figure things out. This is how you develop your discernment, by learning how to do things that are just right. It’s a matter of pushing, pushing, pushing yourself to an extreme. There are times when we’re in the mood that we could really push ourselves. But being an extremist doesn’t require much intelligence. It’s learning how to balance things out. That’s where the intelligence comes in. That’s where the discernment gets developed, when you realize, “Okay, this is too far, this is too close, this is too heavy, this is too light.” How do you find that out? By realizing, “Okay, something’s not right. It’s not working.” Then you go back and try to get very, very still, see what comes up. Whatever comes up, you’ve got to test it. It’s not the case that once the mind is still, you can trust everything that comes into it. A lot of the really wrong views that people can get involved in as they meditate come from a very still mind. It’s misinterpreting the stillness, misinterpreting whatever it is that’s holding them there. One of the big things that people misinterpret is the sense of oneness that comes sometimes, as if there was somehow the end-all and be-all in the ground of being. In all it is, it’s a perception of oneness that’s holding you there. And the perception is able to tune into a certain level where everything really does feel one. But when you notice, “Okay, it’s the perception that’s holding you there,” then you’ve got a handle on the situation. You have a way of getting past it. So in every case where people get stuck on things, either good or bad, in the meditation, it’s because they’re not looking at what they’re doing. They see an arrow and their attention immediately goes in the direction that the arrow is pointing, rather than looking very carefully. “What is this arrow here?” Like the old thing about the finger pointing at the moon. You have to look very carefully at that finger. Why is it pointing at the moon? Why does that person want you to look at the moon instead of at something else? Learn to look around, because things are not always what they seem. Because everything you need to know is right here. Everything you’re doing is right here, but some of your actions are covering up other actions. So whatever you’re consciously doing, try to keep things still, keep things very, very clear, so that the areas that are not clear will show up. And the parts of the mind that are not still will show themselves, too. That’s when you have something to work with.

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