Space for Sustained Contemplation

June 4, 2016

You may have noticed we don’t take a vow of silence around here. This is not a meditation retreat where you have meditators and a workforce as two very separate groups. We meditate and we work. Monks should live and take care of the place where they’re living, and take care of one another. And there’s a fair amount of work. The same, of course, holds true for laypeople. We have to learn how to work and meditate at the same time. This means we have to respect one another’s space. Each of us is trying to maintain a quiet center inside, and sometimes it’s difficult. And you don’t want to add any more difficulty to yourself or to the people around you. So in your interactions, try to be as sensitive as possible to the fact that we’re here to be quiet. And we speak when necessary. And anything beyond that is a disturbance. Our quietness, our sense of having a center inside, that’s our inner wealth. So you don’t want to go trampling in on other people’s wealth or taking it away. So you have to be very careful about how you speak. The Buddha himself was very circumspect in his speech. He would speak things that were true and beneficial and timely. They had to pass all three tests before he would speak them. For most of us, though, there’s no guardian at the gate. The mouth opens and things come out. And we abandon responsibility for our words, which, if you do that, shows what’s going on in the mind. The mind itself is not responsible, and an irresponsible mind can’t settle into concentration. So we want to be admirable friends for one another, in other words, be good examples for one another, and respect one another’s space. Because, as I said, our inner space has a lot of problems. Just keeping the mind quiet is a major task. To say nothing about digging down deep into the ground and understanding the causes for why we’re making ourselves suffer, just getting the mind to settle down, is a major, major project. Because the mind has lots of different trap lines. In other words, you feed it on all kinds of things. Just like hunters have trap lines. In other words, they walk around and they have a sequence of traps that they check every day to see if there’s some food they’ve caught. We have our trap lines. Physical food is one thing they like to think about, and lust is something else, and pride is something else, and who knows what else is out there that we feed on. This is why we have those contemplations. They work on two levels. One is to help you settle down in the contemplation of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, reminding ourselves that everything we eat, wear, and every shelter we use in order to protect ourselves from the weather, like when it’s hot like this, and the medicine we take, all of this places a burden on other people. We sit there fantasizing, particularly around food, how much we like the food, how much we want to eat it, how we’d like to fix it this way, and how about fixing it that way, and how about this way. You sit there for hours thinking about this. But you have to realize that what you’re thinking about is the way you are indebted to other beings. You’ve got to think about it in those terms. If just having that sense of indebtedness is not enough, you can also think about the repulsiveness of food, where it comes from, where the food all comes from the dirt. Even the best vegetarian diet comes out of the dirt. And when it goes into your mouth, it’s nothing that you would want to think about anymore. We think about what’s about to come into our mouths. That’s as far as it goes. But if you think about it all the way through, the fact that what your body actually takes nourishment from is the state in which food gets when it’s down in your stomach and in your intestines. That’s what you’re really feeding off of, but that’s the part that’s hidden. But it’s there. You reflect on this, not so that you won’t eat, but simply that you’re more circumspect in how you actually choose your food, and also in realizing that the fantasizing that you do about food is really inappropriate. When you can think in those ways, then the idea of feeding off the comfort of the breath, feeding off of concentration, feeding off of internal pleasure that comes exclusively from being with the breath, or feeding off the equanimity that comes when the mind really settles down, gets more attractive. Same with contemplation of the body. Whatever issues you have around your body or other people’s bodies, it’s good to get them into perspective. Otherwise you can sit here and think about them all the time and there’s no concentration at all, at least not right concentration. So whatever way you can think of why the body is not worth all that attention or all that pride or all that shame or lust or whatever, use your intuition. Use your ingenuity. So you can see that this is nothing to feed on. Sometimes it involves thinking about the unattractiveness of the different parts of the body. Sometimes you have to actually focus on the lust itself. What is lust like? What’s good about it? Well, we have narratives that we create in our mind to justify it and get it sparked. Why do you want to believe in lust? Because it’s part of the mind that says, “It’s good to think about these things,” or “There’s some good reason to think about these things.” Because that’s eventually where you want to go. Why is the mind creating these issues for itself? In other words, you focus on the object that you’ve been feeding on to the point where you realize the problem. One, it’s not worth feeding on, but then the real problem is still inside, that you think about this for a while and then immediately go back to your old ways. So what is it in the mind that wants to go back? What arguments does it give? Those are the things you’ve got to watch out for. That’s where the craving lies. And that’s what we’re trying to focus on, is to find the craving. Because it’s so easy to be thinking about one particular body or one particular type of food and then switch to another one and then to another one and then another one. This shows that the particulars of those mental images are not the issue. The issue is the mind’s desire to feed on these things, thinking that there’s something good, something nourishing in there. And you want to be able to pinpoint that, see it in action, so you can see how stupid it is. That’s when you can let go. You can let go of contemplation, both to get the mind into concentration, to realize concentration is a much better thing to feed on. And then as your mind gets more settled down, then you can go back and look at those old objects and also the way the mind conducts its thoughts about these things, its narratives, its image of these things. What’s going on in there? What’s sparking all this? Even though you can know that the object is not worth it, it’s still there. It’s not worth the lust or the pride or the hunger or whatever. Yet something in the mind will keep going back. What is that? That’s where the problem is. This kind of contemplation, on the one hand, helps get you to the breath, but the breath also helps with the contemplation. This is why John Lee said that the breath is your home base. It’s the safe object of meditation. It’s the place where the mind can really rest. And as you’re dealing with the types of fabrication around the breath, the direct thought and evaluation, perceptions and feelings around the breath, that sensitizes you to the kinds of things that are going on in the mind. Whatever the attachment is or whatever the craving is, you realize it has to be made out of these things. That’s what you want to look for. So this is work that requires a lot of sustained attention and sustained focus, which is why, as we’re living together, we want to give one another space to do that kind of sustained work. We don’t want to chop somebody else’s contemplation up just because we feel a need to talk or need to engage with somebody. If you want to talk, talk to the squirrels. Talk to the rabbit that’s running around up here at the top of the hill. One of the ways in which this becomes a good environment for meditation is that we are doing sustained contemplation or sustained efforts. It’s a very different dynamic from living out in the world, outside. But as you get used to this attitude, you find it makes it a lot more livable and your own mind becomes a lot clearer to yourself. So, watching your mouth is an important part of watching your mind. And being sparing with your speech can also be a really good gift, both to yourself and to others.

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