A Secure Footing

July 14, 2016

The mind has lots of strategies. You can think of all the different things you’ve done to gain pleasure in your life, and they’re looking someplace back in the mind. Some of them are pretty buried and forgotten, but others keep coming out again and again and again. Because you think they give some pleasure when the mind is feeling hungry. When it’s feeling stressed out, it’ll grab just about anything. They talk about people on a shipwreck, and they need to grab onto something. Sometimes it’ll be a board. Sometimes it’s the corpse of someone else who’s on the ship. Anything to keep them from sinking. That’s the way it is with an untrained mind. It tends to grab onto anything at all so it doesn’t sink. Unfortunately, it tends to hold on to some things and actually pull it down. What we’re doing as we meditate is to give the mind something better to hold on to. So much of the practice, of course, is about letting go, letting go. Early on in my time with the Jhana, I remember mentioning what nice is. A lot of people say, “It’s all about letting go.” And he says, “That’s not true. It’s also about developing.” You want to develop good qualities in the mind so you have something to hold on to when you’re letting go of other things. The Buddha himself makes this point many times, that you have to hold on to concentration. If you’re going to let go of other things, you can contemplate the body, as in that chant we had just now, going over the thirty-two parts. You can think about it again and again and again. But if the mind doesn’t have a good, solid place to settle down, it’s going to go right back to its attachment to the body, as before. The same with sensuality, the same with any unskillful habit you might have. If you can’t find anything better, you’re going to hold on to what you’ve got. And what you’ve got is a pretty mixed bag. Some of your old strategies for finding pleasure in the present moment were actually okay, and others were not so okay. But when you talk about the committee of the mind, that’s what they are. They’re different strategies for finding happiness. This is one of the reasons why you can talk to them and reason with them. It’s because you’re after happiness, too. The difference is, you want a happiness that’s reliable and harmless. And this is the direction you go to find that happiness, by getting the mind to settle down. And give it a sense of well-being as you settle down. This is why working with the breath is such an important part of the practice, because it is one of the ways of giving rise to a sense of well-being as you’re sitting here. If you just force the breath to just notice whatever’s coming up, all kinds of things are going to come up, some of which can really knock you over if you’re not prepared. So you want a good, solid, safe place to stay. So at least you have some relative security. It may not be the absolute, but it’s better than a lot of the other things that the mind goes off to feed on. So feed on the concentration. Feed on this sense of being settled in. How good it is that the mind doesn’t have to go jumping around. At this moment it has no other responsibilities. You don’t have to think about tomorrow’s meal, you don’t have to think about tomorrow’s chores or today’s chores. You don’t have to think about the weather. Whatever your responsibilities are around the monastery, you can put them aside right now. Just allow the mind to settle in. And keep reminding it that you can stay here, it doesn’t have to move. Because otherwise it’ll be tempted to tense up. It’ll be prepared for its next jump. Like a cat that settles in someplace, but it’s not really settled in yet. You want it to be more like a cat that’s lying in a patch of sunlight in the afternoon, totally relaxed. Or those pictures of the seals I brought back from Alaska. They’re lying on a rocky coast, but they look like big bolsters with absolutely no bones at all. They don’t eat at all, just like big floppy sausages, totally relaxed. Allow your mind to totally relax into the breath. And be careful not to drop the breath and just focus on the pleasure, because the pleasure can get very vague after a while. You lose focus and you may be still, but you don’t really know where you are. You can slip very easily into what’s called delusion concentration. It’s pleasant, it’s still, but there’s no mindfulness. You want to constantly remind yourself you’re staying here with the breath, staying here with the breath. Even if the breath grows still, you stay with the stillness of the breath. This is one of the skills that the Buddha teaches about not being overwhelmed by pleasure and not being overwhelmed by pain. It’s not that you avoid pleasure and avoid pain. Here you’re trying to develop an extreme amount of pleasure in the concentration. But you want to learn how to maintain your focus. Don’t get swallowed up by the pleasure. The pleasure will do its work. The breath will provide you with a good foundation. That way, when some of your old selves come up, you can look at them and you don’t feel any desire to go with them. And you don’t feel alienated by dropping them. This is one of the main dangers of having a meditation where you don’t develop concentration and just try to go straight to insight and see how everything is inconstant, impermanent, stressful, not-self, whatever. But the mind has no place to land, no place to stand, no place to feel secure and at home. It’s going to get very disturbed. Discernment requires concentration to be solid. Concentration requires virtue to be solid. You want to make sure that your life is one where you’re not harming yourself, you’re not harming others. Harming yourself is breaking the precepts. Harming others is getting other people to break the precepts. You’re trying to induce them to create bad karma for themselves. And that’s what’s going to come back and bite at them. And you don’t want to harm yourself by doing bad things to them. Because as the mind tries to settle down, they’ll be pretty sharp rocks, very sharp, so you can’t really settle down properly. Either that or you’re going to go into denial. And denial is no way to develop discernment. So concentration to be fruitful really does require virtue. It’s not the case that you can’t get the mind concentrated without it. You can, but the concentration doesn’t have, as the Buddha says, doesn’t have great fruit. It doesn’t reward you with discernment. Then again, the discernment based on concentration bears great fruit. If it’s not based on concentration, it can get very depersonalizing and very alienating. And instead of gaining real insight, it just gets you strung out. So develop your virtue to help your concentration. Develop your concentration to help your discernment. And it’s when the discernment is well fostered by concentration, again, that’s when it leads to release. The Dhamma teacher once asked me how I handled cases of people who gained stream-entry but found it disorienting. And I answered him, “It’s not stream-entry if it’s disorienting. Stream-entry is very orienting because you find that there’s something even more reliable than concentration. The insight is that whatever is subject to causation is also subject to cessation. It sounds like you’re just seeing how impermanent everything is. But the thing is, when you think about the concept of whatever is subject to causation, it’s because you’ve also seen there’s something that’s not subject to causation. As the texts say, people who’ve seen this have also seen the deathless. So we’re not here just to cut the feet out from under us or cut the ground out from under us. I don’t know how many times I read about teachers saying,”Well, you want to be totally groundless and you want to strip everything out from under your feet.” That’s not a good approach. It’s not a safe approach. The safe approach is to give you a foundation or to teach you how to create a foundation for yourself. So as you contemplate inconstancy, you see there’s something behind it that’s not inconstant. And it’s really there. It’s always there. It’s just that our ignorance gets in the way, so we can’t see it. But the knowledge that comes from practicing concentration and probing into the mind as it’s concentrated, that’s what cuts through that ignorance. So give the mind a good place to stay. Put it in a position where it can look into itself carefully and not get knocked off base by the fact that there’s a lot of stuff in there that you’re not going to like. A lot of your old attitudes, a lot of your old strategies, when you re-look at them in a fair, unbiased way, will often seem very shoddy. Well, it’s good to admit to yourself you’ve got those shoddy things, because that’s how you get beyond them. But you also need something better to remind yourself that that’s not all there is to you. So this is what we work on. The self-esteem that comes with virtue, the sense of reliability that comes with concentration. These are the things that provide the foundation for your discernment to really bear fruit.

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