A Measure of Control

August 24, 2016

I was talking on the phone tonight to someone who was having energy problems in her meditation. She’d sit down and there’d be these uncontrollable flows of energy out of her head. And every time she mentioned the word “self” or “herself” or the idea of control, she kept backing off. She said, “I know there really is no self, but this is happening to me. I want to have some control over this, even though I know I don’t have any control over anything.” I said, “No, no, no. We do have some control, and we want to make the most of that fact. That’s why there is a path.” I think sometimes some of the reasons that people have these uncontrollable energy releases is the idea that they should not be trying to exercise control in the less control they try to exercise over things, the better. And then something like this explodes. As the Buddha said, one of the purposes of doing meditation is learning how to have some control over your thoughts, thinking the thoughts you want to think and not having to think the thoughts you don’t want to think. So even though in the Sermon on Not-Self, he says that if the mind is not the body, or your feelings, or your perceptions, or your fabrications, or your consciousness were you, you’d have total control. To have them be this way or have them be that way, whatever way you wanted them. As we all know, reality puts up some resistance. Simply wanting something to happen is not going to make it happen. But if you have the desire and the proper technique, you can exert some control. It’s like you use your sense of self. If you’re going to take your sense of self apart, you first have to learn how to use it wisely. So, for instance, you can play with the breath. That is exerting some control over it. And we’re doing it all the time. It’s just that we tend to do it haphazardly, willy-nilly, without having a full idea of the range of possibilities, what we could do with the breath, and the beneficial things that we can do with the breath, and also have some knowledge of the harmful things we can do with the breath when we force it too much. But if you look at the breath, you begin to notice that you can make it longer or shorter, sometimes just simply by thinking about making it longer or shorter. And the advantage of doing this is that you create a better place to be in the present moment. We’re getting the mind into concentration, and in some ways we’re actually fighting against the three characteristics. We’re trying to create a state of mind that’s constant, that’s easeful, and is to some extent under our control. It may not be totally under our control, but it’s there. It’s under our control, but it’s under control enough that we can use it. So take advantage of that fact. Don’t toss your sense of self out the window right at the very beginning. As John Lee’s image says, this is making yourself a pauper and then saying, “The fact that I’m poor is a sign that I’m not attached to wealth.” Well, you don’t have any wealth to be attached to. What we’re actually trying to do here is develop noble wealth inside. And that’s the kind of wealth that’s not problematic at all. It doesn’t create any problems. You don’t have to oppress anybody. You don’t have to cheat anybody, the way a lot of worldly wealth requires. Then you’ve got good things in the mind. In particular, we work on the path. There will come a time someday when we put the path aside, but that’s because we’ve developed it and it’s done its work. So exercise some control over your mind. Figure out what kind of breath is good for the body right now. This is wise control. It’s not control freak control. Wise control actually listens to what’s needed. What does the body need right now? What does the mind need right now? Where are you out of balance? How can you bring it back into balance? Just barge in, but at the same time you don’t let things just take their own course. You adjust here, you push a little bit there, nudge a little bit here, to get a sense of what you can do. And you’d be surprised at what you can do. The mind that never seemed to be able to get down into concentration after a while, there you are. The first time it happens, you don’t know why it happened. But try to remember, when the mind is settled in, what’s the breath like? Can you remember what you were doing before it clicked and settled in like that? Try to remember that for the next time. So you have an instinctive sense of where your spot is, the spot where the mind tends naturally to center when it’s put down its burdens, put down its concerns about other things, and feels at ease in the present moment. See if you can go back to that center the next time you meditate. Sometimes you find it works and sometimes it doesn’t work. Well, that means next time around you have to be a little bit more observant. It’s this way that the meditation becomes a skill. As Ajaan Lee says, when you’re developing a skill, it’s not that you’re just pushing things around the way you want them to be. You actually have to learn from the object that you’re working on. If you’re mixing clay to make tiles, you have to learn from the clay. If you’re learning how to weave baskets, you have to learn from the material that you’re using to weave. So there’s a dialogue, there’s a back and a forth. But as you engage in the back and forth, you find the areas where you can have some control, and particularly learn control over your thoughts. The basic standard is that you want to think things that are true and beneficial and timely. Most of us just think willy-nilly, true and false, beneficial, harmful, timely, untimely. And it pulls our minds in all sorts of directions. This is one of the reasons why an important part of the path is right speech. If you can learn how to make your words true and beneficial and timely. Timelier means knowing the right time to be critical and unpleasant with your words and knowing the right time to be pleasant. But it also means knowing just the right time to say something to get the best effect. If you can’t do this with your words, there’s no way you’re going to be able to do it with your thoughts. So to get some control over your mind, the first thing is to get some control over your mouth. Think about what you want to say before you say it, which is a lot better than having to think about it afterwards. Because thinking about what you’ve said after you’ve said it, you’re helpless. You can’t go back and erase the words. Even if you think beforehand, you’ve got a chance to put up a filter and say no. Then you think about, “Will this actually be beneficial, or am I just letting off steam? Is this timely, or am I just letting off steam?” The words of your mouth are the worst way to let off steam. Because the steam comes back and it scalds you. In the meantime, it’s scalded the people around you. So learn some control over your mouth, and then you find that it’s easier and easier to learn some control over your mind. You find, of course, that this goes up against old habits. But that’s the part of self that you want to call into question. When the Buddha teaches not-self, in the beginning you have to apply it selectively to habits that you realize are unhealthy, unhelpful, unskillful. That may have been the way you’ve done things for a long, long time, but you don’t have to keep doing it. You’ve got the freedom to say, “No, this is not going to be me anymore.” And then you do your best to make it stick. Again, having concentration as a safe, easeful center for the mind, foundation for the mind, and stick with your determination that some old habits you’re just going to think up, “Not-self. Not-self. That’s not me. That’s not what I’m going to be.” As the Buddha said, you learn how to create a sense of self that is reliable. You train yourself in new habits. You learn to see your self-identity as an action. It’s a choice you make. You can identify with a thought or not. It comes up in the mind. Just the fact that it’s in your mind doesn’t mean it’s your thought or that it’s a thought that you have to take on. There’s stuff coming from old karma, there’s stuff coming from people around you. All kinds of influences can be coming in. But you have the freedom now to say yes or no. “I’ll take this on or I won’t take this on.” This is what’s meant by saying that not-self is selective in the beginning. And we have a sense of self. We need a sense of self in order to find happiness. We identify with the person who’s going to receive the happiness, and we also identify with the person who has the skills to bring that happiness about. Without that kind of self-identity, happiness is hard to develop and maintain to the point where it’s actually something reliable. It just keeps being hit or miss. So if you develop a healthy sense of what you want and the skills you need in order to get it, and if you find you don’t have the skills, you can develop them. We’re not stuck with the way we are. We move in the right direction. The point where you let everything go is when the path has done all of its work and you’ve got all the happiness you need. You’ve found the deathless and it doesn’t need any protection. It doesn’t need a sense of self in order to protect it. In fact, holding on to a sense of self at that point gets in the way. That’s when you let it go. Remember the image of the raft across the river. You hold on to the raft as you let it go. As you’re crossing the river, once you get to the other side, you don’t need the raft anymore. So you pull it up on the ground and leave it there for someone else who may need it. You don’t have to carry it on your head. But while you’re still on the river, you’ve got to hold on. So make sure that the raft is latched together properly. It’s a good raft. Hold on as you swim across the river. You do your best to develop yourself in the right direction. And as for your unskillful selves, you can just leave them by the wayside. Let them flow down the river. You’re trying to pile them on the raft. You’re going to weigh yourself down. So learn how to develop a fluid sense of who you are. Fluid in the sense that it’s going to flow in the right direction. And you do that by developing skills that will help you find a genuine happiness. That’s the control you want to exert. You’re heading off to the other shore. You’re not just spinning around. This way, when unsettling things come up in the meditation, you don’t have to just sit there and bear with them. You’ve got the right to figure out, “What am I doing right now that’s encouraging this? How can I stop? How can I exert some control over this in a skillful way?” That way, you’re not left exposed to all kinds of problems. As the Buddha said, one of his duties as a teacher was to provide protection. Of course, he’s not going to go around and protect you from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But he is going to give you the knowledge and the skills, teach you the knowledge and the skills, whereby you can protect yourself. That’s the best protection of all. (crickets chirping)

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