The Airplane Mechanic

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We all want quick results in our meditation. This is not just an American habit. After all, we’re all going to die and we don’t know when, so we don’t know how much time we have left to practice. And the texts themselves encourage an attitude of urgency. It’s like finding out that your head is on fire. Remember, mindfulness in all your efforts to getting the fire out as quickly as possible. But at the same time, the texts also counsel patience. So how do we combine those two qualities? You might think of an airplane mechanic. You get to the airport, discover that your flight has been delayed because of a technical problem, and probably want the mechanics to get done with the problem as quickly as possible so you can get in the air. And another part says, “Well, no, wait a minute. If they’re really quick and careless, we could die.” So the mechanic has to be quick and careful at the same time. And this is what it’s meant by being patient. It’s not that you just sit around and wait for things to happen on their own. But at the same time, you don’t try to accelerate things just by putting more pressure on yourself or demanding quicker results. The right combination is to realize that you want to be more consistent in how you practice. In other words, instead of having little bits and pieces of time and different parts of the day to practice, you’re trying to make them more continual. Even when you’re not sitting with your eyes closed, you want to be observant of your mind, observant of your body, and try to be as sensitive as you can. That’s one part of the practice where you actually can’t accelerate. What you’re doing, the results you’re getting, as you try to get more familiar with your body, get more familiar with your mind. This will take time. But if you’re observant, the time you put in will then make things quicker as you go along. It’s like a mechanic really gets to know a particular engine. You almost have to be friends with the engine to know where its weak points are and where it tends to malfunction. So you have a more intuitive sense of where to look for the problem when a problem comes up, how to read the symptoms. It’s the same with any friendship. You have to be observant and you have to be consistent. That’s how a friendship develops. Consistent in showing that you mean well. And observant in figuring out what’s going on with the other person, here with your body, here with your mind. There are parts of the body you’re not very familiar with, or parts that you’ve been blocking off for one reason or another. It’s not only that you don’t know them, they don’t trust you. And blocking them off, you’ve starved them and they don’t take kindly to that. So it’ll take a while to be observant, to see exactly what the problem is, and to show your consistent good will as you breathe through different parts of the body. In other words, showing the shut-off parts so that you can treat the other parts of the body well. If there are problems that take a while to untangle, be willing to put in that while. Don’t be too insistent that things have to be done right away. But if you are more observant, you might begin to notice that the way you’re doing things or the way you’ve gone about them is inefficient. And that way you can begin to zero more in on exactly what the problem is and how you can deal with it more quickly. But it takes time. And it means also having to put up with some mistakes. There’s that phrase, “Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgments.” In other words, you make mistakes and you learn from them. You have to be willing to put up with the amount of time it takes. Because this is a careful job, you want to work with the mind as you would with any complex piece of machinery. You don’t just go barging in. You’re trying to figure out when something’s coming up in the mind, why. What are the stages? And if it’s a state of mind that you don’t like, why does part of you like it? Are you willing to admit to yourself that part of you likes it? And then you can ask yourself, “Why? What do you get out of it?” And be quick to observe when something like that begins to arise, why you go for it. That’s the quickness that’s required. And the slowness is just that you have to be consistent with it. You can’t expect problems like this to be solved in x number of days. An image they like to use in the forest tradition is that you’re a hunter. You go out and you’re very quiet, but you’re very observant. And you’re willing to put in a lot of time. Because when the animal you want to catch comes, it’s going to come quickly. And you have to be quick enough to catch it. But at the same time, you have to be willing to put in a lot of time. You have to be very consistently alert, consistently still. So there are aspects of the practice that are quick, but in order to get quick at them you have to be willing to put up with the slow periods. And not be slow. In other words, while you’re waiting for things to happen and they’re not happening yet, well, just try to make sure that your tools are ready. Your mindfulness, your alertness, your ardency. You keep these developed. And you’re trying to keep them consistent. Because sometimes the insights into the mind come in little tiny cracks where you tend not to be observant. The mind is often like a piece of music. There’s a phrase, and then there’s a brief pause, and then there’s another phrase, and then another pause. And all too often the really interesting things happen during the pause is when you’re not paying attention. This is one of the reasons why we’re trying to make our mindfulness, our alertness, and our concentration consistent. To see through those pauses, to notice what happens as the mind begins to disassemble itself and then regroup for the next effort. There are stages, and there’ll be little glimpses here and there. So do have a sense that your time is precious. We don’t know how much more time we’ve got, but the work requires skill and it requires care. So you don’t rush through things. Let that pressure of how little time you have, or how unknown the amount of time you have, be more in the area of being very sensitive and being very consistent. That way the sudden insights will come because you’ve laid the groundwork. The image in the canon is of the continental shelf off of India. There’s a gradual slope going out and then a sudden drop-off. The insights, when they come, will be quick. But again, it requires being gradual, using your discernment again and again and again to try to figure out what’s going on. To notice what’s happening. And with use, your discernment gets sharper, quicker, more precise. So allow your discernment to get to know your body. Which parts of the body are resistant? Which parts of the body are easy to move into? Get to know your mind. Which problems in the mind are easy to deal with? Which ones require more than just telling yourself to let go? But having to understand many stages in the process. This willingness to put in time is what makes things go quickly. So that’s the paradox. It’s a paradox when you stop to think about it, but in practice it all makes sense.

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