Redirected Thought, Re-evaluation

October 20, 2018

When we read the descriptions of right concentration, it talks about direct-to-thought evaluation. It sounds like something you’ve got to start doing that you haven’t been doing before. Actually, it’s something you’re doing all the time. Direct-to-thought evaluation is the Buddhist description for how you talk to yourself. It’s one of the ways in which we shape our experience. We frame issues, we choose a topic, and then we ask questions, make comments, and we’re getting the mind into right concentration. We’re doing the same thing, but we’re doing it directed to one thing. We’re trying to do it with knowledge and a lot more skillfully. That’s the difference. You might describe it as “redirecting.” Direct-to-thought and re-evaluation. In other words, you’re going to direct your thoughts in a new way. You’re going to drop a lot of the ways you’ve been talking to yourself in the past and try out the Buddha’s language, try out the Buddha’s recommendations for how you should think. First, it’s good to think about all the things that might pull you away from concentration. Remind yourself you don’t want to go there. This is one of the reasons why we have these chants at the beginning. They’re a reflection on karma, a reflection on how life is full of things you’re going to be separated from. Looking at your body, realizing you can’t depend on that. It’s just your karma you can depend on. So you think about all the things that other people have done to you. And realize they don’t matter. It’s what you’re doing that matters. Then you think about the fact that all beings are subject to aging, illness, and death. All beings are subject to separation. All beings are the owners of their actions. The Buddha said the first contemplation, thinking about your own aging, illness, and death, gives rise to a sense of heedfulness. The second gives rise to a sense of sanghvega that gets you on the path. You realize that no matter where you go, it’s going to be the same stuff over and over again, no matter how many lifetimes you go through. Aging, illness, and death. Pleasure, pain, food, death. Again and again and again. Think of all the people you’ve known. The Buddha said it’d be hard to find somebody who hasn’t been your father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, or son. They’re all around us. And so the relations that sometimes drive us crazy right now, you have to realize, they’re not all that permanent. You want to offer what you can in terms of your help, your good karma. But there’s a lot that’s outside of your control. If you’re looking for happiness there, you’re looking in the wrong place. Then you’ve got to have good will for everybody. If you had ill will for them, you’d be entangled in all kinds of problems, and you’d feel bad about yourself. Either that or you’d feel justified, which puts up the wrong attitude in your mind. So you develop good will, compassion. In other words, you want to help those that you can. Empathetic joy. You’re happy to see those who are happy who are doing things that are skillful. But then equanimity, realizing ultimately it comes back to that principle of karma. There are some people you cannot help because of their karma or your karma. And it’s not that you’re indifferent to them, it’s just that you realize you can’t put your energy there. We think these things at the beginning of the meditation to clear the decks, so the mind is ready to settle down. That’s when you start directing your thought to the breath. In other words, you keep reminding yourself, “This is the topic you want to work with.” Then you try to evaluate it. The evaluation is the area where we often have to relearn how to talk to ourselves. The breath comes in, goes out, and it feels good. Can you just notice the fact that it feels good? Then try to watch, “How did I breathe that made it feel good?” We talk about letting that sense of ease spread. Well, there are ways you can grab hold of it to spread it out. Then you ruin it by grabbing hold. How can you let the ease just sit there lightly and then spread on its own? Think of the word “allow.” You allow it to spread. Or you try to maintain the rhythm of breathing that feels okay, that feels like it’s flowing smoothly through the body. And if you have trouble finding a good rhythm, just keep working at it. Or just tell yourself, “Well, let the body breathe on its own.” Because the problem may be that as you direct your thoughts to try different ways of breathing, you’re going to put a lot of pressure on the breath, which is not helpful. Just tell yourself, “Okay, let the body do the breathing. I won’t stop it, but I’m not going to be responsible for what it does. I’ll just sit here and watch.” So you’ve got to learn how to use your ingenuity to figure out when things are not going well and what you can do. This is a principle in the forest tradition that has a long history. People going to study with Ajahn Mahan would sometimes complain to themselves whether there were things that he was leaving out. But then his principle was that if everything were handed to you on a platter, you’d get used to just getting it every day for free. You wouldn’t have to use your own powers of observation. You wouldn’t have to use your own ingenuity. You wouldn’t have to learn how to develop a sense of just right, which is where the discernment comes in. So you take the basic principles and then you try to figure out how you adapt them to what you’re doing right now, and how you can learn how to relate to your breath in a way that does allow it to feel good and gives the mind a good place to stay. And then, as the mind does settle down, you have to deal with the fact that sometimes you feel unstable. It’s something new. You have to learn how to talk to yourself then, too, to remind yourself, “Okay, this is going to take some time to feel secure here and to feel okay about not talking to yourself much.” Just about a few basic things. There’s no interesting conversation going on. Think of that cartoon that was in the New Yorker years back. Two women are talking, and you can look into the living room. There in the hallway, you look in the living room, there’s a guy sitting and meditating. And the wife is saying, “Henry used to be such an interesting neurotic before he took up yoga.” Well, the conversation that goes on in the mind as you’re getting it to settle down becomes less and less interesting. It’s there just to maintain you. So you have to learn how to adjust your directed thought and adjust your evaluation to what’s actually happening with the breath, with the mind, so you can relate to the present moment in a way that’s really secure. Doing your work. You want the foundation for where you’re going to do your work really solid. It’s like that image that John Lee had of setting up a charcoal furnace. He said you want to put it on some ground that is really solid. Otherwise, if the ground isn’t solid, things will crack and the furnace will be useless. So work on making this really solid right here. John Fung had a student one time who was complaining about how she’d been working for a long, long time on her concentration. She wanted to know when the next step was going to be. And he said, “Look, you’ve got to get the concentration really solid.” It’s like building a building. If the foundation isn’t solid, then you put up one or two stories and the whole thing falls down. If the foundation is really solid, you can put up 30, 40, 50 stories and it’s not going to fall over. So learning how to talk yourself into being still, into staying still, is different from the way you talk to yourself normally. So think of some of the Buddha’s recommendations for how to do it. Adopt his vocabulary. Adopt his language. And see how you can rethink and reevaluate your way into a state of mind that’s really solid, secure. Ready to do the work that needs to be done.

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