In the Shape of a Circle

October 14, 2019

The Buddha gives analogies for the practice. There are never any analogies for people who relax their way to awakening. They’re all more active than that—people trying to master a skill, people searching for something, people going into battle. I was up north last week and I mentioned this and someone complained. He’s going into battle with your defilements. Isn’t that violent? The answer, of course, is that your defilements do a lot of violence to you. You can probably think of times when you haven’t been able to sleep because of thoughts that drive you crazy. I got a phone call this evening from a monk who was afraid he’d done something that would have disqualified him from being a monk. It turned out he hadn’t. It was only a very minor offense, but he’d been going through hell. So you have to realize there are times when you really have to do battle with these things. You can’t treat your defilements as little children who have to be treated gently. They can come on strong. They can get you to do things that you’re going to regret for the rest of your life sometimes. So you need to be committed to protecting yourself from them. When Ajahn Chah went to study with Ajahn Mun, there was one phrase that Ajahn Mun used that stuck with Ajahn Chah for a long time afterward. That was that you have to practice in the shape of a circle. Your practice is continuous. You have to be committed to it. Here we are at the end of the rains. Some of us have taken special vows in the course of the rains, and there’s a temptation now that the rains are over that you can give up the vow. The whole point of taking on the vow for three months was to see if you could live with it, see what the results are. And if the results are good, why give it up? Because during the rains and not during the rains, it’s pretty irrelevant to whether greed will arise or anger will arise or delusion will come. It can cause trouble for the mind. So if you’ve found something that you can live with, something that works, stick with it all year round. That’s what it means to have the practice in the shape of a circle, or one of the beings. You stick with it all year round. Even as you’re sitting here meditating, you’ve made up your mind you’re going to be here for the hour. You’ll be here for the whole hour. Don’t just check in the time clock at the beginning and then check out at the end. Wander around in the meantime. Each time you breathe in, try to be with the breath. Each time you breathe out, try to be with the breath. And the spaces between the breath, try to be with the body. You’re trying to get your mindfulness so it’s not just like phrases in music. If you’ve ever played a musical instrument, you know that you play several notes continuously and then you rest and then there’s another phrase. If you’re playing a piano, you have different phrases going on at the same time. Breath are these points where you stop. It’s like stopping to take a breath and then you move on. And there is that tendency in the mind for your mindfulness to come in a phrase and then stop. And you pick it up again and then you stop. Well, see if you can make it continuous. You stick with the breath and you don’t have the sense that the breath ends and your mindfulness ends with the breath. And if you look very carefully at the breath, you realize that there’s no clear dividing line between an in-breath and an out-breath. They kind of shade into one another. And in the very beginning, it’s convenient to try to mark the difference clearly. But if you really want to get concentrated on the breath, think of the breath as the whole body energy. And the in-breath comes in, it’s breath mingling with breath. And then what goes out? There’s no clear marking point and it starts coming in again. And there are no clear boundaries. So try to have no clear boundaries in your mindfulness. Try to make it continuous. Be committed to this because it’s only when the mind is really committed that it can see changes. Often we’re afraid. It’s like seeing a lake of water and afraid that it’s going to be cold. So you just tip your toe and it seems very cold and you pull back. You tip it in again and come pull it out again. But then you discover you just actually walked into the lake. It wouldn’t be that bad. And of course, it’s our defilements. It’s our defilements that say, “Fight us only a little time and give us some space and we’ll be nice.” But you have to see them when they’re not nice. And it happens when you make your practice in the shape of a circle. They find they can’t get in. When Ajahn Jha was thinking about Ajahn Mun’s image there, he thought of a fence around a house. And if the fence is complete, animals and other things can’t get into the land and can’t get into the yard. But if there are missing boards in the fence, then something can get in. So think of it as a defense that you have. You’re fighting your battle against your defilements, but you leave big holes in their defenses. And of course, they’re going to come in and they won’t complain too much because they’ve got their ways into the mind. But you really want to see them when they complain. That’s when you learn about them. The part of the mind that’s afraid of commitment is afraid of dealing with defilements when they get strong, because they come on and they’re really scary. But you have to remember, it’s a facade. When they say, “They’re just going to build and build and build, and you’re going to have to give in, otherwise you’ll explode,” I’ve never seen anybody explode from their defilements, or especially from resisting their defilements. You learn that they come in waves. They’ll come for a while and then they’ll disappear, and then they’ll come again and disappear. But they threaten you with more. One of the ways they threaten you is by taking over your breath. Well, you can take your breath back. You can be in charge of how you breathe. Then you find that they’re a lot weaker. When they’re weaker like that, then they have to argue with you. They have to present reasons. And this is where you see how weak they are. A lot of times the reasons they would give are pretty bad. The kind of reasons that a bully would give. When the bully is strong, the bully can get away with all kinds of stuff. But when the bully has been weakened, then you see the reasoning that the bully uses is weak. They can’t use physical strength. They can’t use their powers or persuasion. That’s when you begin to get past them. So be committed. Make your practice in the shape of a circle. It’s all around you, all the time, 24/7, except for when you’re asleep. And whether you’re at the monastery or whether you go home, it’s the same sort of thing. You want to protect your mind at all times, because it’s in danger at all times. It’s in danger. Greed, aversion, and delusion. The parts of the mind that are ready to pick up the same sort of seeds from people outside. When your practice develops momentum, it comes from having and making it continuous. In John Fuehring’s analogy, it’s the times of the day. We keep dividing our day up into time for this and time for that, and it all gets chopped up into little times. But if you can make your practice timeless, in other words, regardless of what you’re doing, whether it’s time to eat, time to wash up, time to work, time to rest, see if you can make it make no difference. It’s time to meditate, time to watch your mind, time to be on top of your mind, all the time. It’s when you’re committed like this that the practice gives results.

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