Patience

November 22, 2019

The nature of the mind is purposeful. As the Buddha says, we engage in different activities that he classes under the aggregates. And each of those aggregates—whether it’s feeling, perception, form, thought constructs, or consciousness—is something we fabricate for the sake of something else. In other words, we have means and we have goals, and the goals are either directly aimed at happiness or indirectly. This is how we find meaning in life. Whatever activity we do, we want to accomplish something. We plan it for the sake of what we engage in. When it doesn’t get the results we want, we get frustrated. And this is where you have to learn patience. Patience in asking yourself, “Are the goals really worthwhile? Are the means proper to the goal? What adjustments do I have to make?” To find a goal that really is worthwhile—in other words, one that’s worth the effort—really does provide a satisfying happiness. And then you adjust the means. What’s going to work? When you’re dealing with the mind as you’re meditating, you find there’s a lot of frustration. Because you’re dealing in a territory that our culture teaches us to ignore. How you feel from within. There are some cases where it’s so extreme. I’ve been reading recently about structuralism. They deny that how you felt from within had any meaning at all. You’re just the product of cultural conditions and the structure of your brain. You have no choices. Other parts of our culture are less likely to try to erase you. But still, they want you to pay attention outside. The media tell us that the really interesting things in the world are things that other people are doing someplace else. So when you come to sit and meditate, you find that the territory inside here has gotten squeezed out of shape. Because of all the emotional ups and downs of things outside. It can’t help but have an impact on the body and the way you breathe, the way you experience the body from within. But if you’ve been ignoring it, these influences just build up. So when you sit down to meditate, you find yourself having to sort through a lot of stuff. It’s like having been away from your house for a long time. Then you come back and you find that animals have moved in and pests have moved in. The pipes have broken. There’s dry rot here and wet rot there. And you wonder, “Is it worth it?” Well, you have no other house. This is the house you’ve got. So you’ve got to clean it out. Fortunately, we have it within our power to clean it out. We start with the breath of all the properties in the body, of all the functions in the body, of all the things that are most directly influenced by the mind. So you’ve got a double duty here. One is working with the breath and then being patient about it. Because if you get impatient, that’s going to have an impact on the breath, and the breath will not be the tool you want it to be. It’s like a double bind, almost. So this is where you have to learn how to talk yourself into finding some sense of well-being. Here in the present moment, it can be that there are some places in the body where you can have a sense of well-being. You focus on those. And then you gradually try to expand the range. If there’s no spot in the body that’s obviously pleasant, you say, “Okay, I’ll content myself with what’s okay.” Or you can carry a perception of the breath energy around the body. That doesn’t have anything in the way. It doesn’t have anything forcing it to be one way or another. Then think of that good breath energy around the body, penetrating in through the pores. And hold in mind the perception of the body, not as a solid lump. Think of it as an energy field. You’re not trying to breathe in, you’re not trying to push breath into a solid lump. You’re simply allowing energy to flow into a place where there already is some energy. Think of good energy flowing in, bad energy flowing out. In other words, make use of the power of your perception. Because a lot of how you experience the body right here, right now, is going to depend on how you perceive things, the way you envision things to yourself, the way you talk to yourself. So try to give yourself some strength. If there’s nothing in the body right now that feels good, talk to yourself in a way that reminds you that you’re developing the perfection of patience, you’re developing the perfection of equanimity, the perfection of determination. These are qualities we’re going to need in life anyhow, so here’s a good chance to develop them. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha puts the perfection of giving at the beginning of a lot of the dharmas. When he’s giving a graduated discourse, taking people step by step up to a point where they were ready for the normal truths, he would start with giving. Because you learn some important lessons from giving. You learn that you have choices. You can choose to give or not. And you learn some patience. You give and you’re going to be expecting something in return, even if it’s just a good feeling inside. But it’s always a trade. But sometimes the return doesn’t come for a long time. You have to learn how to talk to yourself, to remind yourself you’ve got this virtue of generosity. That’s going to pay off someday. And in the meantime, you think about how spacious your mind is because you were able to give. One of the most important lessons, though, is that there is a ranking of pleasures. Say you have some food. You could eat it. That would be it. Or you could give it to somebody else, and then you can think about the fact that you were able to share. And the pleasure that comes from that knowledge is much greater than the pleasure that comes from just popping something into your mouth. So the practice of giving should teach you some lessons about delayed gratification and the ranking of pleasures. And then you turn those lessons over and you use them to develop patience in other areas. And as you notice, a large part of enjoying the process of giving or having given is how you talk to yourself, finding pleasure in what you’ve done. So if you’re sitting here working with the breath and things don’t seem to be working at all, remind yourself that at the very least you’re engaged in something important, which is the training of the mind. Remind yourself also that there is a way to get around these problems. For example, the Buddha wasn’t all that sure that he was going to be able to find a path to the deathless, but he put his life on the line. He found it and he taught other people, and other people taught other people. It’s been passed down. So whatever problem you’re facing in your meditation, remind yourself that other people have faced this problem and they’ve been able to solve it. And don’t use that thought to get down yourself. Use that thought to give yourself hope. There must be a way around this. There are no insoluble problems in the meditation. And you can also think of this as paying homage to the Buddha. There’s a nice passage at the end of the Buddha’s life when he’s laying down for the last time and Devas start sprinkling incense and throwing flowers down and playing celestial music and song. And the Buddha mentions this to one of his attendants. He says, “But that’s not how you properly show respect to the Buddha. You show respect by practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.” And that’s what we’re doing right here, right now. So think of the fact that we’re sitting here with our eyes closed. It’s an act of homage to the Buddha, an act of respect. We’re not just here getting something for ourselves. We’re appreciating how good it is that someone found this path and has passed it on, formulated it in such a way that it’s lasted now for more than 2,600 years. So try to cultivate some thoughts of gratitude, thoughts of respect. And that can be uplifting. If you’re simply sitting here meditating and saying, “I’ve got to get something out of this before I go back home,” it gets very narrow. But whatever good things you do, remind yourself, “The Buddha taught that it’s good to do these things, and out of respect for him, I’m going to do this.” Whether the returns are quick or not—and this applies not only to things in your meditation but other things in the practice—whether the results are quick or not, nourish yourself with your thoughts of gratitude, nourish yourself with your thoughts of respect. There’s so much in the world that is not worthy of respect. It’s good to honor the things that are. There’s a great passage in John McPhee, he wrote a book on people who live in the wilderness up in Alaska. And he visited this one couple who really were engaged in subsistence farming. They lived totally in the wilderness, what they could find in the wilderness. And he’s leaving them one day. He’s going to go back into town. And it turns out that they have some business they have to do in town as well, so they’re going to go along with him. And as they stop to camp for the night, he feels kind of embarrassed. He’s taking a little inflatable pillow along with him. And he’s afraid that they’re going to look down on his efforts to make life a little bit more comfortable. So he mentions the fact to them. He says, “I guess I’m not really roughing it.” And the wife and the couple says, “Look, we’re not here to rough it. We’re here to smooth it.” In other words, even though they were living in the wilderness, they found ways to make it comfortable. And that’s how you can endure a lot of hardships, is finding where you can find a sense of well-being in the midst of the hardships, in the midst of the disappointment, in the midst of the frustration. In other words, you learn to make light of your difficulties. And when you make them light, then you can bear them and learn from them.

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