One Task with Many Facets

November 26, 2021

When you read the description of Right View, you try to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, and you abandon any unskillful qualities that have arisen. You try to give rise to skillful qualities. And once they’re arisen, you try to maintain them. It sounds like you have four different things you’ve got to do. The same with the four noble truths. They have four duties. To comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path to its cessation. This may seem like a lot to do all at once, but in actual practice, you notice that the word for meditation is develop, bhavana. You focus on the developing. Like right now, you’re trying to develop stillness in the mind, trying to develop mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind, alertness, watch what you’re doing, watch the results of what you’re doing, and then ardency. You’re trying to do this well, and you’re trying to do that. It’s very natural that things will come up that you have to abandon. The main emphasis is on the developing. Abandoning is almost an afterthought, but it’s part of the process. You try to stay with the breath, and in doing so, you’re preventing unskillful qualities from arising each time you maintain that intention. So the four right efforts are basically four facets of one thing. So keep that in mind, that you can maintain your focus here and you don’t have to worry too much about the other duties, because they become part and parcel of what you’re doing right here. We may like to think that we’re out to slay our defilements, but if you just sit there with a sword in your hand and wait for the defilements to come, they hide out. And sometimes it’s hard to recognize what’s a defilement and what’s not. But when you’re trying to get the mind focused, you lay down the law and decide anything that’s going to interfere with your focus, you’ve got to let go. That gives you a standard for deciding what’s skillful and what’s not in terms of what you’re trying to do right now. So it’s a part of this activity of getting the mind to stay focused. Then it’s simply a matter of learning how to do that skillfully, and as you bring more and more skill to it, learn where to stay focused in the body as you try to be sensitive to the breath energies in the body. If there are pains, which pains you can focus on, which pains you shouldn’t focus on. As you deal with these issues, the things that come up and get in the way are obviously obstructions, obviously problems. So, for the sake of your focus, for the sake of your concentration, you’ve got to let them go. That way you can maintain the sense of oneness here and do various things all at once. Like with mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, the Buddha parses them out as three separate things. But what are you mindful of? You’re mindful to be alert and ardent. What are you alert to? You’re alert to what you’re remembering and what you’re trying to do. And you are ardent in trying to be mindful and alert. These three qualities help put another along. When you finally get them into the right balance, then they become one activity. It’s the same when the Buddha describes the factors for right concentration. It sounds like you’re doing five things, but again, they’re five things circling around one thing. You’re focused on the breath and you’re trying to adjust the breath so it feels just right. Right there you’ve got direct thought and evaluation. You don’t even have to think direct thought and evaluation. You just pay attention to the breath. Pay attention to what feels good. And the sense of ease and even rapture will come. They’re the results. You focus on the causes and the results will come. So even though the Buddha analyzes these things out into different things, they really are a part of a oneness, one activity that you’re working on. He gives descriptions of the different steps of breath meditation, and it’s the same sort of thing. There are two activities—staying focused, say, on the breath in and of itself, and then putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Those are two sides of one thing. And as you maintain that focus, a feeling of pleasure will come. And as you maintain that focus, you’ve got to be alert. And you have to be a chronomist for the things that would come up and interfere. So you’ve got all four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind, mental qualities—all covered in this one activity. So instead of being scattered among the four of this or the five of that, you’ve got to be alert. Your attention gets focused on one, on being focused right here, maintaining your stillness right here. And then around that are the activities that protect it. And as long as you sense that something is about to harm it, then you can deal with the problem. You don’t have to analyze it out into its various factors. You just know you’ve got to protect things. And you find yourself letting go of things without having to think too much about it. The important thing is that you really do want to stay here. You really are curious about what happens when you stay with the breath. And you do work with the breath energies. That focus of desire and curiosity, that’s what animates all this. And then circling around that, you’ve got these other activities. The analysis into the four of this and the five of that is for when things are not balanced. You’re trying to figure out what’s wrong. Why can’t I maintain my focus? Or if the focus is there, but it doesn’t feel right, what can I do to make it feel right? Or do I have to simply accept the fact that tonight it’s not going to feel right? Work around that. Make sure that the mind, at least, has the right focus. The right attitude to what you’re doing right here. Calm but insistent. You want to get settled in. When you see the way in which all these things begin to come together and adhere, that’s when the mind can settle down with a sense of well-being. A sense that everything is coming together.

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