Dealing With the Heat

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The Buddha warns when it’s really hot or really cold that you don’t take the heat or the cold as an excuse not to practice. That thought, “It’s too hot to practice” or “too cold to practice,” identifies as the thought of a lazy monk. But still, you do have to practice. Don’t judge just your practice. That’s when it’s hot, like it is right now. Think of the Buddha’s image at the Lute. You probably know the story. There was a monk who had been practicing really hard, to the point where his feet were bleeding from his walking meditation. He was getting ready to give up. As he sat there thinking of disrobing, the Buddha appeared right in front of him and asked him, “Do you think you’re giving up?” The monk said, “Yes.” Then the Buddha asked him, “When you were a layperson, were you skilled at the lute?” “Yes.” “When the strings were too taut, how was the sound?” “It was bad.” “When the strings were too loose, how was the sound?” “It was bad.” “How about when the strings were just right?” “That’s when the lute sounded good.” Apparently, in those days, they had five strings on their lutes. So compare the five strings to the five faculties. Take your level of energy as your measure. Tune that one first, and then tune the rest of the faculties—conviction, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—to your level of energy. Then you can pick up your theme of meditation in the same way that a lute player back in those days would pick up a theme of a raga. Then play a song. So here, of course, the theme is the breath. But there are other useful themes as well. In practice, it’s often good to start with goodwill. A lot of the techniques that you would use for dealing with pain are also useful for dealing with heat. The only difference is that sometimes you feel surrounded by the heat; you may not feel surrounded by the pain. The pain may be focused in one spot or another, whereas when there’s heat, it’s all around. So first think of the different elements in the body. The one you want to focus on is the element of water, which Chan Phuong would identify as a sense of coolness in the body. Where right now is the coolest spot in the body? Focus there. And if it moves around, you move around with it. You’re able to maintain a steady connection with that sense of coolness, even if it’s just relative. Still, it’s cooler than other parts of the body. Allow that coolness to spread. It may not be able to spread far, but think of different spots in the body that are cool and there’s a cool stream connecting them all. As for the heat, as I said, it’s when you’re dealing with pain. First line of business, don’t think about how long the heat’s been going on, how much longer it will go on. You’re right there with a sensation right here, right now. And when you don’t weigh the mind down with thoughts, thoughts of past and future, it’s a lot easier to take on the present. And then think thoughts of goodwill. It helps get you out of your thoughts of how much you’re suffering from the heat. Have goodwill for yourself. May I be happy. And being happy here means being happy whatever the circumstances outside may be. That’s how you really show goodwill for yourself. You do take care of the body in line with the fact that it’s hot outside, trying to find a quiet, sheltered place to stay. Drink plenty of liquid. Make sure you get your electrolytes. We are at the edge of a desert here. But then you don’t have to focus on the pain. There’s a Zen technique saying if the heat wants to be as hot as possible, just let it be. See how hot it wants to be. Don’t fight that. Even though you are focusing on the coolness, the rest of the body can be allowed to do whatever it wants. And it’s funny how freeing things in that way takes a huge burden off the mind, in the same way that when you have been finding that you’ve been tensing up around the pain and you’re releasing that tension, that shell of tension you put around it to protect it, you find that the shell is more of a problem than the pain itself. So that part of the mind wants to resist the idea that it’s hot outside or that there’s any heat at all, for fear that the heat might get too much. It creates a lot of tension. So if the heat wants to be hot, that’s its business. It’s like dealing with sounds. It’s the nature of sounds. Be loud. But if you can think of them going right through the body, without having any impact on the body, you can be with the sounds and they don’t make any impact on your concentration. The same with the heat. The heat can go right through. Think of the cool parts as being like a screen. The heat may go through the screen and the screen stays cool. And the heat can go right through. When you don’t put up resistance to the heat, it’s a lot less of a burden. Remember the John Fuling story? When he was in the rain, he’d set up his umbrella tent, thinking that there was no sign of any cloud. And then somehow at midnight a storm blew up, so he put all of his robes in, and he kept telling himself, “The body may be wet, but the mind isn’t wet.” And then as the wind and the rain blew, he was soaked. He kept telling himself, “The body may be wet, but the mind isn’t wet.” And being able to separate his awareness from the body that way, his mind went into deep concentration. So in the same way, the body may be hot, but heat is not a mental quality. So it’s not a quality of the mind. The heat can go only as far as the body. It doesn’t have to go into the mind. When you have that sense of being separate, then it’s a lot easier to practice. Actually look into the mind. See what’s going on that’s skillful, unskillful. Do your regular work in the meditation. If you find that your energy level is low, then think thoughts of goodwill. Just hold onto that one perception, “May all beings be happy,” and think of it spreading as far as you can. In these ways, you can continue practicing in the midst of the heat, adjusting your attitude. It’s in line with the fact that there is some pain in the heat, but you know how to deal with pain. You’ve learned how not to let it get to you. So you can be there with it, but you don’t have to suffer from it. And with that thought, you can keep on practicing. (crickets chirping)

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