Can Do

January 7, 2023

There’s a passage in the Canon that says, “Concentration nurtured by virtue leads to discernment. Discernment nurtured by concentration leads to release.” We hear that. We should keep it in mind. Because we come to the practice, we’re coming out of ignorance. We’re going to be doing things that, in many cases, we’ve never done before. And yet we have to have the confidence that we can do it. But virtue is something we’ve all had some experience with. And even concentration, as the Buddha said, has been through many, many lifetimes. And some of those lifetimes may involve the Brahmo worlds. Most likely they do. Which means that you’ve mastered concentration in the past, but that was as far as you went. Then you fell down again. So in that sense, getting the mind to settle down is something you’ve done before. You’re learning how to use that something you’ve done before to get the discernment you’re going to need. Because we’re talking today about dealing with pain, dealing with distractions, and sometimes not feeling that we’re up to it. Wondering if we’ll be up to the dangers that will await us as we approach death. This is where the Buddha would counsel confidence. We’ve been able to develop virtue and we have concentration. It’s simply a matter of learning how to use it. In some cases, you’ve read in the books how to deal with distractions, how to deal with pain, all the different techniques that the Ajahns recommend. It’s interesting that dealing with pain is such a big issue in the meditation. And yet there’s so little of any explanation in the Pali Canon. When it comes to feelings, the Buddha simply recommends learning how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture, gives rise to a sense of pleasure. You get sensitive to mental fabrication, which are feelings and perceptions, and then you calm those mental fabrications. That’s the outline for the Buddha’s approach, but very little detail. But it’s basically saying that you can get the mind into concentration and you can induce these things, you can follow these steps. Basically what it means is getting the mind still and then posing that question. Say there’s a pain in the body, and it’s a sharp pain. It’s not the ordinary pains of just sitting and meditating. It’s something more challenging. How do you breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment? There are lots of different ways you can conceive of the breath. And already you’re beginning to use mental fabrication, i.e., perceptions, because these will be the big issues. Your perceptions around the pain. It starts with the perceptions of the breath. What is the breath? Where does it start? You can think of it as starting outside. You can think of it as starting inside. You can think of having one primary center where it comes in. You can ask yourself about the mechanics of breathing. A lot of times, as we sit and meditate, we develop a lot of tension in the neck and the shoulders because we’re using the neck and the shoulders as kind of a frame. And then we push against that frame as we breathe in and breathe out. Try to think of the breath as a free gift that’s coming in. See what that does. You don’t have to pull it in. It comes in on its own. It’s there, ready to come in, if you simply let it. And there are levels of breathing that are very, very quick. As soon as you start breathing in, there’s a level of in-breath that’s already going through the whole body. Can you detect that? Can you take advantage of it? It’s especially useful when the pain is in the trunk. And the ordinary mechanics of breathing just get in the way of the pain, or the pain gets in the way of the mechanics, and they seem to aggravate the pain. Think of different parts of the body breathing. Your legs can breathe. Your arms can breathe. Work with your perceptions. Be open to different possibilities. And if nothing occurs to you, just try to be really, really quiet and say, “What would be useful here?” And see what happens. There is that quality of patipana, as they call it in Pali. It’s your ingenuity. It’s your powers of invention. It’s when the mind is open to new ideas. There’s a passage where a monk has been in a conversation with a prince, and the prince asks him, “Is it true that when you practice, you get results whether you wish for them or not?” The monk says, “Well, you have to do the practice right. The wishing is really irrelevant. Of course, if you don’t wish for some results, you’re not going to be doing the practice. But it’s the actual doing of the practice that will make the difference, and not the wish.” Then the monk goes and reports this to the Buddha. And the Buddha gives his famous analogies about the difference between trying to get milk out of a cow by twisting the horn, and trying to get milk out of a cow by pulling on the udder, or trying to get oil out of sesame seeds, as opposed to trying to get oil out of gravel. Then the Buddha remarked to the monk that if he had used these analogies, the prince would have been more convinced. The monk says, “Well, how could I have used those analogies? They’ve never occurred to me. I’ve never heard them before.” Of course, the Buddha probably never heard them before either. But the Buddha had that quality of ingenuity, seeing patterns. I think that was Aristotle’s definition of intelligence. Seeing patterns that haven’t been pointed out to you, seeing connections that haven’t been pointed out to you, or similarities that haven’t been pointed out to you. But the ability to see those similarities often comes from just letting your mind be very quiet. And very open. Try to ask yourself with fresh eyes, “What’s going on here? What is it in the way that I’ve been seeing things in the past that has gotten in the way of my being able to be with this pain and not be pained by it?” So you try to breathe in a way that feels refreshing. That’s one approach. You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease. If you can’t get it in the area of the body where the pain is located, try to get it in another part of the body. And you get more and more sensitive to how the feeling and your perceptions are having an impact on the mind. And this is where the Buddha says you want to calm those feelings and perceptions. So this is where the question of what kind of perception around the pain would be helpful. In Jhammahambhava, there are quite a few. Asking yourself, “What is it in the way that I’ve been seeing things in the past that has gotten in the way of my being able to be with this pain and not be pained by it?” And a good part of your mind says, “No, of course not.” But there’ll be another part of the mind that says, “Well, that’s what it feels like.” And you can say, “Well, can you feel it in such a way that they are not the same?” And it requires a little bit of shift in your mental vision. It’s like those old magic eye pictures they had years back where you looked at them one way and it was just a two-dimensional pattern of weird shapes. And then there was a little shift in your brain, and you saw a three-dimensional picture. And to get that shift, you had to get very quiet. This is the concentration based on virtue which gives rise to discernment. Because you want to see things as they’re actually happening and be true to yourself, true in telling yourself, observing what’s actually happening. And being open to a possible shift. Because you have to keep reminding yourself, “Other people have done this.” The Buddha’s not asking you to be a genius. A genius is someone who sees a problem that no one else has seen and can figure out a solution. He’s simply asking you to be a little bit intelligent. In other words, you see a problem that other people have solved and you figure out how they solved it. Whatever problem you’re facing in your meditation, other people have solved in the past. It’s not like they were superhuman. We do get that attitude sometimes, reading the texts and reading about the Buddha. “Well, the Buddha could do that, but that’s because he was Buddha.” One monk would say that about the Buddha’s special qualities. “Well, he’s special because he’s Buddha.” And he’d say, “Well, where does becoming a Buddha come from?” “It comes from developing the qualities.” And the Buddha developed those qualities well before he was a Buddha. But we tend to see only the final results. It’s a lot easier to sympathize or identify with people who are closer to us in time. So wherever you find an example that’s inspiring, remind yourself, “Those people could do it. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. If they could do it, so can I.” There’s that famous passage where Ananda’s talking to the nun and says, “We try to practice to overcome conceit, but we do need some conceit on the practice.” And this is what he means by the conceit there. You’re comparing yourself with other human beings and saying, “At least they’re equal.” And that’s a really necessary part of the path. Because after all, there was no one there to teach them all the ins and outs of the Buddha’s teachings. He gave the same basic general instructions to everybody. But in working out the details, each person had to do that for him or herself. But it wasn’t something that was a superhuman challenge. These are human challenges. There’s that famous story about Richard Feynman, the physicist who got it. He said one time he wanted to go down to Brazil. So he learned some Portuguese. He went down and got a part-time, part-of-the-year job teaching down in Brazil. And while he was there, he learned how to play the bongo drums. He mentioned this in one of his essays. And someone wrote to him and said, “Well, this shows that you really are a human being.” And Richard Feynman was really offended. He said, “Do you think doing physics is not a human activity? Using your brain is not a human activity? We live in a culture where we’re not encouraged to use our brains. We’re encouraged just to believe whatever we’re told. But we are human beings. We have imagination. We have a quality of inventiveness. Think of some area in your life where you’ve been inventive and ask yourself,”How did those ideas come to me?” A large part of it was posing the right question and then being very quiet, admitting, “I don’t know the answer yet.” But if I’m quiet enough and I’m observant enough, something will come. That’s what you’ve got to trust. That’s where this quality of patipana, or ingenuity, comes from. So have the confidence that you have what it takes. The Buddha didn’t teach anything that was superhuman. He tries to get you to develop what he calls superior human qualities. And you can make yourself a superior human by being observant. And John Fuehring noted that when he was practicing as a child, he didn’t do very well in school at all. But Ajahn Lee had taught him how to think. How to ask questions. He used the Thai term kraikroon, which means “you contemplate.” But the kraikroon includes the word krai, which means “you do this because you want it.” So ask yourself, “Do you really want to put an end to suffering?” If you say, “Yes, that’s what I want,” you have what’s within you to do that. And the Buddha’s basically saying, “Don’t let anybody say that you shouldn’t or that you can’t. And don’t let any part of yourself say that you can’t do it.” We tend to limit ourselves by how we define ourselves. “I’m the kind of person who can do this. I’m the kind of person who cannot do that.” That kills the practice right there. You have to be the sort of person who can, can, can. It’s simply a matter of getting in the mind to be really quiet and observant and ask the right questions. Ask new questions if the old questions don’t work. And have the confidence that there is a way out. When the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, there was the one teaching he gave where the earthquake happened. It’s interesting. When he taught the Five Brethren, the Three Characteristics, nothing quaked. But the Four Noble Truths caused the earthquake. He’s basically saying that suffering is something you can comprehend, you can abandon the cause, and you can realize its cessation. And there’s a path of practice you can develop to do that. And the Buddha’s basically saying that to each one of us. So take heart that that message was not meant for somebody else alone. It’s meant for you, too. Let that have an earthquake effect within your own mind to stir you out of your feelings of inadequacy. This is something you can do, even though you’ve never done it before. You’ve got within you the potential that you can do it. It may involve some conceit to have that attitude, but it’s useful conceit. You don’t let go of that conceit until the very last stage of the path. It’s going to help you all the way there.

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