Right Here

August 28, 2023

Ajahn Fung often said that the practice has its own rhythms. You can’t determine at a time what rhythm your practice is going to follow, or how many different rhythms it will follow. The Buddha said as much when he noted that there are those people who have fast practice and pleasant, fast and painful. Slow and pleasant. Slow and painful. And that list is not a menu from which you can choose. You simply do the practice and you will find which of those categories you’re in. And you can test the practice over time. You can evaluate it to see how well it’s going. But in terms of how much you can accelerate it, that’s going to depend on a lot of factors that are beyond your control. The mind, of course, is a very complex phenomenon. It has lots of different parts, lots of different voices inside, lots of different identities. Lots and lots and lots of different attachments. And sometimes you’re not going to know what those attachments are until you run into them as you uncover things. But the constant is that the main focus of the practice is right here. The mind in the present moment. Every aspect of the practice, everything even from generosity on up, focuses here. When you give a gift, the Buddha’s focus is not so much on the gift itself but on the attitude with which you give. When asked where a gift should be given, he said give where you feel inspired or that you feel it would be well used. And then learn to reflect on what kind of gift would be good, what would be appropriate for the person receiving it. So you put some discernment into the process. The mind is doing the same with the precepts. You make a vow, you make an intention, and then you try to maintain that intention. If you happen to break a precept unintentionally, it doesn’t count. So even though the precepts are concerned with your physical actions and your verbal actions, they point into the mind. This was an issue in the beginning of the forest tradition. A textbook had come out of Bangkok saying that virtue was a matter of your physical and verbal actions. It made no mention of the mind at all. And the Chan Mon was very critical of that book. It said it reduced virtue to ceremony. Whereas the essence of virtue was with the intention, the factor of the mind. This is one of the reasons why right view and virtue are the requisites for getting the mind to settle down. The foundations for mindfulness are just that. And when he said that loss of virtue and loss of right view are serious, he meant it not only in the sense that they could lead you to do things that would lead to a bad destination in the future lifetime, but also they would make it impossible to train the mind any further. So you look after them, both for the sake of the future and for the sake of the present moment. So you can train your mind here and now. And then you look at the factors that go into the concentration section of the Noble Eightfold Path, just now. You start with right effort. And effort is not so much physical effort, it’s effort in the mind. Unskillful qualities are not there. You try to give rise to them. When they’re there, you try to develop them. If unskillful qualities are not there, you’re trying to make sure they don’t arise. But if they do, you abandon them. That’s effort at the mind. You can do that while you’re lying down. You can do that while you’re perfectly relaxed physically. And then from right effort you go to right mindfulness. You establish your mindfulness with a good frame of reference, and you’re ardent, alert, and mindful. To maintain that frame of reference and to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, moving on to any other reference. Ardency there, of course, is right effort. This is often missed in explanations of mindfulness, because people take the Siddhipatthana Sutta as being a complete explanation of what mindfulness involves. But it’s only partial. At the beginning of the Sutta, the Buddha sets out the full formula for right mindfulness. For example, keeping track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. But then the question he addresses in the Sutta has to do only with that one part of the formula. What does it mean to keep track of something in and of itself? Which means that the whole rest of the formula is not really addressed. What does it mean to be ardent in this context? What does it mean to be mindful? How do you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world? A complete mindfulness practice addresses those issues. The Sutta addresses them not at all, only indirectly. So unlike what some people might say, that the practice of right effort and right mindfulness are two different things, right mindfulness actually grows out of right effort and continues it, gives it a foundation, gives it a frame of reference. And then that establishing of mindfulness becomes the theme of your concentration. You focus on the breath and you’re ardent, alert, and mindful. And that’s how you get into the different jhanas. The alertness and the ardency lead to directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation. And as these grow and develop, they bring a sense of rapture, refreshment, pleasure, ease. And then you focus on that sense of ease and allow it to spread to fill the whole body. But you don’t lose your focus on the breath. If you do, you begin to blur out. So you’re still making an effort. It’s just that it’s very refined. And then you follow that breath. And it’ll take you all the way to the fourth jhana as things settle down, separate out of the mind. And then the Buddha encourages you to step back a bit from your concentration. Don’t leave it totally. It’s as if one mind begins to separate out of your mind and watches it. So you can watch yourself in action. And you begin to see your concentration in terms of the five aggregates. There’s form, the breath, feeling, the feeling of pleasure, perception, the mental image that allows you to stay with the breath, to visualize it to yourself, fabrication, your directed thought and evaluation, or simply your intention to stay here, and then consciousness, what’s aware of all these things. And as you see your concentration and mindfulness, in these terms, that brings you around to Right View again. When the Buddha sets out the path, sets out the different lists of Dhammas that go into the Wings to Awakening, there’s this way in which they circle around, spiral around. So in this case, concentration leads to Right View. And where does it do that? It does it right here. You don’t go anywhere else. Even though the Buddha uses the image of a path, this is a path that stays right here and simply allows things to develop. You can make a comparison with a fruit on a tree. When it first grows, it’s a tiny little thing, green, hard, nothing you could eat. And you don’t say, “Well, this is obviously the wrong place for this fruit. We need to attach it to another tree.” If you picked it and tried to attach it to another tree someplace else, it would die. The right way is to leave it right where it is, and then to cultivate it. In other words, look after the roots, look after the tree. And the fruit staying right there, going nowhere else, will start to grow. So your practice stays right here. Your body may go all kinds of places, but wherever you are, you will have a sense of “right here” inside. And that’s where you keep your focus. Just stay right here. And things will develop. Your understanding of “right here” will develop. Your sensitivity to “right here” will develop. So don’t go away. Your body may leave, but your mind stays right here. And that’s where the path will begin to show its rewards. Because when the Deathless is found, it’s right here. It’s not in the present moment, but it’s found by getting to know the present moment really well, and taking apart any unskillful things, even the slightest sort, the slightest disturbances in the present moment, until things open up. So even though you may be going away, you’re going to stay. The body goes lots of different places, but your focus stays right here. That’s where it belongs.

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