Issues of Control

May 7, 2024

There are times when the Buddha finishes his dharma talks by sending the monks out to meditate at the roots of trees, the empty dwellings. But he doesn’t say, “Go do samatha,” tranquility, and he doesn’t say, “Go do vipassana,” or insight. He says, “Go do jhana,” the noun jhana. Jhana is related to a verb, jayati, which has a second meaning. It means to burn with a steady flame. Pali has different words for what we in English would say to burn. Jalati is the usual one, the fire, the burning of a fire that’s a fire in a fireplace, fire in a bonfire. It flickers here and there. Jayati is the verb for a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. So it gives you an idea of the kind of mind state you’re trying to develop. But it’s interesting that the Buddha’s instructions for how you get the mind into jhana don’t mention the word jhana at all. His descriptions of right concentration where he does mention the word jhana don’t tell you how to do it. They simply say, “This is what this state is like, and that’s what that state is like.” Instructions for how to do it come in the definition of right mindfulness. You keep track of something in and of itself, in this case the breath. You’re ardent, you’re alert, and you’re mindful. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So you stay focused on the breath. Any other thoughts that would get in the way of the breath, you put them aside. And for the time being, thoughts of jhana might count as thoughts related to the world. Because all too often you want to come out and say, “Well, I got this jhana, I got that jhana.” I noticed that when Ajahn Fueng taught, he never guaranteed anyone’s level of jhana. You talk about the breath. “How does the breath feel?” he would ask students. And as the mind settled down, they would discuss it. They would describe it in different ways. And then he would use their vocabulary with them, making the point that we’re not here to score points on the jhana scorecard. We’re here to get to know our own mind, to get the mind to settle down. And how deeply it settles down has to do both with our ability to calm things down in the mind, and also to gain some insight into what’s going on. There’s another sutta where the Buddha talks about how to get the mind into jhana requires that you have some tranquility and you have some insight. And to gain insight and tranquility on a higher level, you have to have jhana. So the process of getting the mind to settle down, what the Buddha calls developing and abandoning, is going to develop both the levels of tranquility you already have and what insight you already have. The way you focus, though, should be on the breath and your mind as it relates to the breath. In the Buddha’s instructions, he talks about bodily fabrication and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication, of course, is the in-and-out breath itself. You train yourself to be aware of the breath in the whole body. Be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out. And then to calm the bodily fabrication. Why he calls it that may have to do with the fact that he’s trying to sensitize you to the fact that you are shaping this. I was talking the other day to someone who had been taught that you don’t try to shape the breath, you don’t try to influence the breath, just let it do its own thing. He found that it felt like he was being pushed out of his body. Because when you deny the fact that you’re shaping your breath, a lot of things go underground. So be upfront about the fact. There is an intentional element in how you breathe. And learn how to make the most of it. As for mental fabrication, it’s the same sort of thing. You sensitize yourself to it, the fact that feelings and perceptions are shaping your mind. And then you try to calm their impact. Which feelings you can focus on are most calming. In the beginning, there might be some intense feelings of pleasure, that you just want to drink up, drink up, drink up, well, drink them up. As the Buddha said, when you gain some pleasure in the meditation, indulge in it. But not to the point of losing your focus with the breath. And by breath here we mean breath energy in the body. And after a while you feel those more intense levels of pleasure. Get tedious. You want something quieter. It’s like listening to the radio. You’ve been listening to hard rock. After a while it just sounds like a lot of noise. You want something more soothing. So you change the channel, change the frequency. You’re in the body. What that means is you’ll notice there are some strong feelings sometimes going through the body as the mind settles down. But there are also more subtle levels of energy. They seem to be on a different frequency. Another analogy is like you’re flying under the radar. Or whatever analogy works for you. Realize that you want something that’s more subtle, more calming. And there are these various levels already there. It’s simply a matter of tuning into them. So as you can see, there’s developing and there’s abandoning. Anything that would get in the way of the mind settling down, anything that would stir up the mind, you want to let it go. Go for what’s most calm. Now sometimes you’ll find that you’re already sleepy and sluggish. You don’t want to go straight for the calm. You want to energize things first. And then let them calm down. But again, this is a skill you learn. Observing what the mind needs, observing what the body needs, and learning how to provide it. And you are exerting some control here. Sometimes we’re told that the lesson of the meditation is that you have no control. That would be depressing. Sitting there watching whatever comes up. Sometimes some really bad things can come up. You’ve got to have some control. You’ve got to have some tools to deal with them. And even though the body says that, in ultimate terms, the five aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness ultimately do not lie under your total control. But you do control them to some extent. If it weren’t for that some extent, you wouldn’t fall for them. And the question always is, with your sense of self, is it worth identifying with them? Is it worth taking them on as a responsibility and trying to influence them? And there’ll be a lot of stages in the path where certain things are worth identifying with. Your desire to get the mind to settle down, identify with that. Your desire to enjoy the results of your meditation, identify with that. Your desire to have a useful commentator in your mind. That’s a skill that’s worth developing. That’s a responsibility that’s worth taking on. That’s where issues in the world are outside. As the Buddha says, “Put them aside.” The word he uses one day, it means to subdue. Remind yourself that you have some responsibility here, and they’re not going to get done by knowing a lot of what’s going on in the world outside. One of the Buddhist definitions of the difference between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person knows what duties fall to him or her, and takes on those duties, and does not take on things that are not his or her duties. Right now, your duties are the shape of your mind. The fact that you’re creating suffering for yourself and a lot of it spills over to burden other people. That’s where you’re responsible. That’s where you need to develop a good sense of self, as being responsible. And John Lee comments on this a lot, that observation that we do have some control over the aggregates, and that’s what the path is all about. That’s his observation. The observation that there are things you identify with as you go through the path, and then you have to let them go. That’s his observation. The question is when to take them on, when to let them go. And a lot of that has to do with you’re taking them on and observing. What are the results? You take on the breath. You learn how to control the breath. And you learn by trying to adjust it here, adjust it there, learning what kind of adjustments are too strong and too harsh, which adjustments are too weak, where the breath needs to go, and then where you need to think of the breath in different ways. There are phases in the meditation when you want to think of the breath coming in from outside. There are other phases when you want to think about it as originating inside, especially as the breath grows more calm. And there is that tendency for it to stop. If you feel that breath is something you have to bring in from outside, the stopping of the breath will scare you. But if you realize that you already have breath inside, breath being the energy of the body, and that it can get full, so full that you don’t need to feel the need to bring in anything more, that allows the mind to settle down with greater confidence. You are taking responsibility for certain actions. You are the one who develops the path. You are the one who abandons things that are opposed to the path. And as long as the concept of you is useful, helpful, as long as it’s worth it, keep it up. There will come points in the path when you realize it’s the only thing that’s standing between you and something unfabricated. And when you’ve been relating to it as an activity, rather than as a solid thing, it’s a lot easier to stop doing it. So when the question comes up about what to identify with, the answer comes up, “What I identify with will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness.” It’s the same basic question that underlines all the aspects of discernment. You are simply taking what you do and replacing it with what you identify with. You’re still dealing in actions, as long as you can see your sense of self as an action that you can choose to do and choose not to do. Then the question is, when is the right time and place to identify with this? When is the right time and place to identify with that? When is the right time to let go of them? That makes the issue of self and not-self a lot easier to resolve. So take responsibility for your practice. That sense of the responsible you is going to be a really useful identification. It will be worth it, because it can take Take it far.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240507_Issues_of_Control.mp3>