An Exercise in Sensitivity

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One of the teachings of the forest tradition is that insight comes, discernment comes, and it doesn’t necessarily have to express itself in terms of the three characteristics or the three perceptions of inconsistency, stress, not-self. Anything that allows you to see that you’re holding on to something that’s making you suffer and you don’t have to hold on. That counts as insight. It’s a development of your sensitivity. One, to see that there is stress, suffering, some place in the mind, some place in the body. Two, realizing that it comes from your clinging. It’s accompanied by the clinging. In fact, the Buddha says it is the clinging. And then three, realizing you have the choice not to cling in that way. So whatever sensitivity you can develop, so you can sense these things going on in your mind, it’s all to the good. So one of the reasons why we practice concentration, we are more and more sensitive to what you’re doing and levels of stress and ease in the mind. Because when you look at the different descriptions of the levels of jhana, they all center around a feeling tone, pleasure, equanimity. And the pleasure gets more and more refined. Even equanimity is in some ways said to be a very subtle form of pleasure. Of course, subtlety comes from doing something again and again and getting more and more sensitive. So as you get more sensitive to subtle levels of pleasure, you also get more sensitive to subtle levels of stress. In fact, when you see the stress that comes in the lower levels of concentration and can let it go, that teaches you an important lesson. What you’re holding on to is stressful. But there are still things you have to hold on to as you go forward. From one level of concentration to the next. Otherwise, you just go back to your old ways of wandering around. And although you can learn some things by watching the mind wandering around, you can learn a lot more by watching it as you try to get it under control. Because the parts of the mind that resist getting under control, as long as you let them wander, you’re not going to know them. They’re going to hide out. There’s a Thai expression, “swam roi,” which literally means you walk in the footsteps of someone else. That’s one way that a thief can get in your house and get out of your house without leaving tracks that you would recognize, because he steps in your footsteps, steps in the tracks that you leave. And so defilements can “swam roi.” They can step into your mind, step out. And you hardly know them. But they’re there because you’re not fighting them. It’s when you put up a fight, put up some resistance, that’s when you understand their power. And to ease the fact that there is a fight going on, we’re fighting to develop a sense of well-being. This, the Buddha said, is essential for the path. It’s your nourishment. You’re learning about feelings. And so what better way of learning about feelings than to create feelings that are skillful and are pleasant. The phrase says, “Wi wi chan kamme hi, wi wi chan gusala hi tamme hi,” secluding yourself from sensual thoughts, secluding yourself from unskillful mental qualities. You settle down. You’re trying to find a sense of well-being with the breath. This is where I jondly recommend that you play with the breath. Long, short, fast, slow, or in long, out short, in short, out long, heavy, light, deep, shallow. You can play with these things to figure out what feels best for you right now. And who’s going to tell you that you’re breathing right? You have to use your own powers of judgment. This is one of the ways in which the process of a jondly called direct thought and evaluation, how he interprets it, as the conversation you have about adjusting the breath, leads to discernment. Discernment is a value judgment. What kind of actions are worth the effort that goes into them? What kind of actions are not? You have to decide for yourself. This is one of the reasons why John Young, when he would teach concentration, would hand out a jondly’s directions on how to get into jhana. But he himself would never mention the term. He certainly wouldn’t certify you as having attained this or that jhana. It was up to you to notice how the mind was settling down. And listening to him teach other people, I began to notice that some people had many different layers in settling down. Some had more than others. You look in the canon, you see it’s the same. There are some places where there are said to be five stages in settling down. Others say there are three. So rather than trying to fit your mind into the mold, you just explore where, as you settle down, is a sense of well-being. Where is there still some stress in that sense of well-being? What can you let go of that would alleviate that stress? We can get some pointers, we get some ideas from the texts, but we have to look at our own experience, be sensitive to our own experience, to get a sense of what the mind is doing and what relative levels of ease and well-being you have as you settle down. So when you hit something that seems good, put a post-it note on it that says maybe this is something important. Then you hit something that’s deeper, well put another post-it note on that. And then as you begin to settle down, one of the objective states of concentration in the fourth jhana is when the breath stops, but you don’t feel any need to breathe, you don’t feel like you’re being stifled. Everything is wide open in the body, so if you had to breathe you could very easily. But it’s just that every part of the body seems saturated with a sense of well-being, a sense of breath energy filling the whole body, that you don’t feel the need to breathe in and out. If there’s any lack of breath energy in one part of the body, it will automatically shift from another part of the body. So you’re learning about feeling, and you’re learning about feeling in terms of the middle way. Remember the Buddha said the middle way avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence, and avoids the extreme of self-torture. That doesn’t mean it’s a middling feeling. It’s looking for pleasure in another way. One, pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, and two, pleasure that’s not an end in and of itself. We tend to run toward pleasure as if that’s the reward of life. We’re saying no, you want to learn how to use pleasure for another purpose. This is why it’s so ironic that people get warned off of strong concentration, saying it’s going to be so pleasant that you’ll just get stuck and won’t be able to gain any insight. And although it is true that you can get satisfied with the pleasure of jhana, the practice of concentration also teaches you how not to get overcome by the pleasure. Basically, if you simply focus on the pleasure, you lose track of the breath, and things begin to zone out. You get into what Ajahn Lee calls delusion concentration, where everything is very pleasant, very misty. But you’re not really sure where you are, what you’re focused on. It’s like someone who takes on a job, gets a paycheck, and then quits the job to enjoy the paycheck. It’s pleasant for a while, but then you’re hungry again, and you’ve got to go back to work. And if the boss sees that you’re so unreliable, you’re not really going to get any raise, or any advancement in your job. The trick is to learn how to be with the breath, let the pleasure do its work in the body. But you don’t lose your focus on the breath. So you’re actually learning how not to be overcome by pleasure, if you really want to master the concentration. So it’s an exercise in sensitivity, and it’s an exercise in learning how not to get waylaid by pleasure. And also to appreciate equanimity. For most of us, equanimity is dull, uninteresting. In some cases, it’s defeatist. We realize that there are things that we can’t change, and so we just give up. But this is a different kind of equanimity. You see that it’s actually more desirable than strong feelings of rapture and pleasure. But it’s an equanimity that comes after you’ve been satisfied with a rapture in pleasure. The equanimity that comes when you’re well-fed. Someone offers you some food, you say, “Well, no thanks, I’m already well-fed.” So you’re changing your relationship to feelings. Simply in the practice of concentration, there are more subtle tasks that you have to do with your discernment, beyond getting it into concentration. But getting it into concentration exercises your discernment already. So learn to appreciate concentration. You know that chant we have where it talks about respect. One of the things you respect is the training, and another thing you respect is concentration. Now the irony there is that concentration is part of the training. So why did the Buddhists single it out again? It may have been because concentration is something that so easily gets overlooked. People are in too great of a hurry to go to the insights. As John Lee would say, for a lot of people when they meditate, at the drop of a hat, they want to go straight to inconstancy, stress, not self. All those teachings have their time and place. But you don’t want to apply them to the concentration, until the concentration is strong, and it’s done its work in making you more sensitive. So it is sensitivity training. Develops your discernment, develops your powers of judgment. So bring some sensitivity to the practice. And John Fung noted one time that the commentaries say that breath meditation is good for all types. He said that’s not true. It requires people with subtle discernment in order to do it well. But at the same time it develops your subtlety. So be sensitive, be subtle. Try to get on good terms with the breath energy in the body. Develop a friendship that lasts. And you’ll find that your discernment will develop in a way that’s not forced by the texts. It’s really forced by your own developing sensitivity, which is a large part of its guarantee that you’re not just parroting what you’ve heard or imposing some ideas on your experience. It’s coming from your own quest to understand feelings, and to find the best feelings you can, and to see where that quest takes you.

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