Samatha, Vipassana, Jhana

June 26, 2024

When the Buddha would tell monks to go meditate, he wouldn’t say, “Go do Samatha or go do Vipassana.” He’d say, “Go do Jhana, right concentration.” That’s for Samatha and Vipassana. He explained those as qualities in the mind. He didn’t have a specific Samatha technique or Vipassana technique. He said you needed both qualities to get the mind to settle down, depending on what the problem is. Sometimes you just lull the mind into a sense of comfort by staying with one thing. That’s the Samatha side. And other times you’ve got to analyze what’s going wrong. Why is it that the mind doesn’t settle down? What are you holding on to? What’s getting in the way? There’s an image I can use here in America, you can’t use it in Thailand. It’s like a dog lying down to sleep. It lies down and then discovers there’s a rock or a root or something. So it has to get up and scratch, get the rock out of the way, then lie down again. So as you’re getting the mind to settle down, you’re dealing with aggregates, you’re dealing with form, you’re dealing with perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. But if the mind is willing to settle down, you don’t have to think about those things. Just give it one thing to think about, and your perceptions and your thought fabrications will center on that, revolve around that, without you having to identify what they are. After all, we’re not here to think about those things, we’re here to think about the breath, focus on the breath, perceive the breath, feel the breath. The breath is the focus. And as you focus on the breath, all these other things will gather around. If something’s getting in the way, then you can analyze it, ask questions about it. That’s what Vipassana does, it asks questions. How are fabrications to be understood? How are they to be seen with insight? Insight here being the insight that allows you to let them go. And if you’re not clear about what exactly is a perception or a thought fabrication in the beginning, that’s fine too. Just have a sense that if there’s something disturbing the concentration, then you can identify it and let it go. That’s all you need to do. But as John Lee would often point out, modern day people are in too much of a hurry. They get a little bit of concentration, they want to go straight to insight, because that’s where the real action is, that’s what they’re told. But it reminds me of an image in the Canon. The Buddha uses it to refer to something else, but it’s applicable here as well. The story of an old Brahmin with a young wife, and she gets pregnant. And because he’s such a doting and devoted husband, he provides her with whatever she wants. So she decides that she would like to have a baby monkey for her baby. So the old Brahmin gets the baby monkey, and then she said, “I’d like to have it dyed blue if we have a boy.” “Pink if we have a girl.” And the Brahmin said he’d be happy to do that. Wait until the child comes out, and she says, “No, I’d like to have it done now.” So she goes into another room, takes a knife, slits open her belly to see what gender the child has. And of course the fetus dies, because she’s in too much of a hurry. The whole point about getting the mind into concentration, to give rise to discernment, is not that you have to check off the boxes, that you’ve got this factor or that factor all taken care of. It’s in trying to master concentration that you’re going to gain a sense of what exactly a perception is, what a thought fabrication is, and so on with all the aggregates, all the possible ways you could fabricate around concentration. The Buddha talks about how different levels of concentration get peeled away as you go from one level of concentration to another. Or alternatively, how you can look at a state of concentration and begin to identify. Where is the form, i.e. the breath? Where is the feeling? The feeling of ease. Where is the perception? The mental image you use to hold the mind with the breath. Where is the fabrication? The intention. The whole thing’s here. And the consciousness, the awareness of what’s going on. As you get better and better at concentration, you can sort these things out without destroying the concentration. That’s the important thing. Otherwise you start analyzing things and the concentration is gone. To make another analogy, it’s like playing the piano. When you start out, you’re just happy that you can get the notes right. And then as you get better, you learn how to listen to yourself. You learn how to phrase things. You learn how to get different emotions out of the piece. You see more and more potentials there. You see more and more of what you’re putting into the practice, putting into the playing. Because you do it again and again and again, and you get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing. The primary task right now is to get the mind still, get the mind centered with the breath. And whatever helps keep you here, you do that. And then after a while, as the mind settles in and feels more naturally centered here, then you can let up a little bit. Like you don’t have to talk to yourself about the breath. You don’t have to adjust it. When it feels good, you just stay with the breath. And whatever it is that’s disturbing the concentration, as you get more sensitive, you’ll sense it. In the beginning, you don’t notice that it’s disturbed at all. But it’s really settled in. Of course, if there are hindrances getting in the way, you do what you have to do to get rid of them. And you can begin to see how a hindrance might be formed out of a perception. Or a thought construct. Or it might come with a feeling. You learn about these things by doing them. Because that’s what you’re doing all the time. You’re doing the aggregates. In the same way that with your sense spheres, you’re adding an intentional element there. Without that intentional element, you wouldn’t sense anything in the senses. You have to get really sensitive to what’s going on in order to see that. And again, the concentration allows you to get more sensitive. One, because you’re quieter. And two, because you have a more developed sense of what really does feel good in the present moment. So the work is getting the mind still. The descriptions for how you do right concentration are there in Right Mindfulness. You keep focused on the breath, in and of itself. And you’re ardent, alert and mindful. And anything else that’s not related to the breath, anything related to the world, you just put it aside. Then you get more and more refined in how you stay with the breath, more and more solid in your concentration. And you learn things as you do the concentration. That’s in an understanding. How the mind can disturb itself and how it doesn’t have to. That’s where the insight arises. It’s not an insight that’s carried over from books. And John Lee would talk a lot about vipassana sannya. It’s not the real insight. It’s just ideas that you picked up from reading about insight. And that simply disturbs the concentration and pulls you out. So allow things to develop. Get really intent on getting the mind settled down. And getting more and more refined in your sense of how you can get it even more settled down. And the insights will arise naturally.

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