The Skill of Stillness

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There’s a sutta where the Buddha talks about attitudes and activities that lead to the lower realms. And some of them are things you might expect. Gambling, engaging in illicit sex, prowling around at night. But there’s one that brings you up short. Laziness. And the Buddha expresses it this way. You get into thoughts that say, “It’s too early. It’s too late. It’s too hot. It’s too cold. I’m too tired.” And the work that needs to be done doesn’t get done. In cases like that, you can’t let those things get in the way. You have to put yourself in the mood. So no matter how hot it is outside or how cold, you want to do the work of training the mind. Part of it comes from having a sense of inspiration in the training. Ajahn Suwat would talk about this a lot. He’d say at the beginning of each meditation session, try to develop a sense of conviction and confidence that what you’re doing here is good work. You’re inspired by the example of the Buddha, of his noble disciples. You’re inspired by his Dhamma. And the other side, of course, is realizing the dangers of not doing the work. You can get in a bad mood and it spirals down. So you’ve got to learn how to control your moods. See the dangers of just following the ups and downs of your moods. Remember, there’s a part of the mind that doesn’t go up with good moods and doesn’t go down with bad ones. It’s there. Sometimes it gets obscured. Because our moods shout at us, not only in terms of words, but also in terms of feelings that run through the body. And we want to learn how not to be governed by them. There’s that belief that if you do what you feel like doing, that’s freedom. It’s not. It’s slavery. You get pulled around by forces that you find hard to control. That’s not freedom. And, of course, your moods wouldn’t tell you otherwise. They say, “This is what I really feel.” As I pointed out this morning, there are lots of voices in the mind that sound like your voice, feel like you. But you have to ask yourself, do you really want to identify with those? Where are they going to take you? Some of them will say, “Well, this is where I am right now.” Learn to appreciate where you are right now. Learn to really feel where you are right now. But we’ve felt these things many times in the past. And when we’ve tried to pull ourselves out of them, sometimes we do it in a very unskillful way, which then becomes more proof that we should honor our moods. It’s simply a sign that we have to learn some new skills. So because they take over the body, one of the first things you’ve got to do is reclaim the body for yourself. This is where I focus on the breath. Because of all the elements in the body, all the processes in the body, the breath is the most responsive to the mind. You tell the body to take a long breath, and it’ll take a long breath. Tell it to take a short breath, and it’ll take a short breath. Fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. It’ll respond. So ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel really good? Try to find a spot in the body that’s sensitive to the breath. It might be down in the chest, around the heart, in the throat. That when you breathe harshly, it feels hurtful there. When you breathe smoothly, it feels good. Sometimes there’ll be parts of the body that go deep inside, and they’re not getting much breath energy. So think of the breath going deep inside, deep into the brain, deep into the middle of the torso. Any kind of breathing that feels really satisfying. When you find something that feels good, stick with it. See how long you can maintain that sense of feeling good. Now there are two things that can change. Either your attention gets a little wobbly, and the breath starts getting uncomfortable again. Or the needs of the body change. The kind of breathing that felt good for a while is no longer necessary. So you adjust it. Keep tabs on things. And bit by bit by bit, you get more centered, more settled. And then you can think of that comfortable sensation flowing out through other parts of the body. Down the spine, out the legs. Starting at the back of the neck, going down the shoulders, out the arms. Down the torso. I generally recommend starting in the area around the heart, going down through the stomach, the intestines, down to the base of the spine. Or you can find the routes that are most congenial in your sense of the body. So different parts of the body that were starved of breath energy suddenly get satisfied. A sense of satisfaction really does help you center. Because the mind does have a tendency to stay with something for a little while, and then to jump off and go someplace else. It’s called momentary concentration. You focus for a little bit, and then you’re gone. Focus a little bit, then you’re gone. And you want to find something that you can stay with steadily, until the breath offers that. As in, out, and then between the in and out. Between the out and the in. And try to make it a steady stream. Chan Chah’s simile is of having a water kettle. And you tip it a little ways, and the water comes dripping out. Drip, drip, drip. And then you tip it a little bit more, and it goes drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. And finally you tilt it enough so it becomes a steady stream. You can use the image of your desire to do this well as a seamstress. You have little moments of concentration. Or you try to stitch them together. Because deeper concentration comes from momentary concentration. I know when I first started out meditating with the Chan Foo, I’d hear other people talking about the visions they had in their meditation, and intense feelings of rapture. I wasn’t getting any of those. I wasn’t doing it right. Whatever little concentration I did have, I was just throwing away. It was when I realized that I had to protect what I had. And that’s when it would develop. That’s when I began to make progress. So protect what you’ve got. And for a while you’d be running around the body, surveying the different parts of the body. As you open up the breath channels here, open up the breath channels there, to allow the breath to go through. But there comes a point where things are pretty much open. The breath is pretty satisfactory. You don’t have to run around a lot. This is when you can settle in. And think of your awareness spreading from one spot to fill the whole body. And then you hold that image in mind. That you’re centered, but that point of being centered, one, is not tight, it’s open. This is an important skill that you have to develop as a meditator. How to focus on something without tightening it up. We think about the word “concentration.” We furrow our brows. Get really tight on something. And you can’t maintain that for very long. But if your sense of being centered is at the point where you’re centered is open and expansive, then you can maintain it for a long time. And it connects with the other parts of the body. There’s less and less of a need to go running around checking here, checking there. And you’re more and more settled. And with the sense of satisfaction that comes from being there, that’s what keeps you there. And you find that you’re less and less interested in going other places. So the mind needs this place of rest. This is where it gathers its strength. This is where it gathers its sense of well-being. So protect what you’ve got. So the question of what’s next, this is what’s next. Learning how to master the skill of staying. We’re so good at jumping. We need to learn the skill of staying. And the mind will complain, it’ll say, “This is getting boring, nothing’s happening.” Actually, a lot of things are happening in your mind all the time. We mentioned this this afternoon. There are perceptions, there’s acts of attention, acts of intention, feelings. Levels of conversation in the mind. So there’s plenty to watch here if you want to watch. And the best way of learning about these things is to resist anything that’s going to pull you away. And if that’s the thought that this is boring is going to pull you away, well, resist the thought that it’s boring. And if it sounds like you’re saying that, just assume that it’s somebody else assuming your voice. You don’t have to believe it. You don’t have to identify with it. The skill of not identifying with your thoughts is one of the most important skills you’re going to learn. So here’s your chance. Identify with the sense of being centered, ready to be centered. And the perception that everything inside is connected. The breath is going to calm down when you hold that perception in mind. So hold on to it steadily. This is the general pattern of concentration. First you have to do your cleaning up work around the body. And then you get the mind so it’s more and more settled, more and more still. As for the different levels of concentration you go through, remember they all come around this sense of stillness. You don’t have to make up the different factors of jhana to check them off on your checklist. Just stay still. Anything that comes up to disturb you, you let it go. As your sense of disturbance gets more and more refined, that’s how this center you’ve got right here gets more and more solid. So even though this is not the goal of the meditation, it’s a skill you’re going to have to master. And there is an element of discernment that you develop in settling the mind this way. You begin to see different things, different mental events, different mental actions you didn’t see before. But for the time being you don’t focus on them. You focus on the stillness. Because you’re going to need that on the path. Think of a John Munn teaching a John Mahabal. Eight years of real stillness. Before he decided it was time to give him a little kick. Take more of an interest in analyzing the mind. Some of us, like a John Mahabal, have a tendency to want to think a lot. So we have to learn how to develop the alternative skill. Learning how not to think, or to think only in ways that maintain the stillness. So this is an important skill that you want to master.

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