Stick with It

October 21, 2024

Try to stay with your breath as consistently as you can. If you fall off, wander away, come right back. This quality of persistence is what makes a difference in your practice. If you’re with the breath for a little bit, wander away, come back for a little bit, wander away. It’s no different from any other thought you may have in the course of the day. You’re trying to see what happens to the mind when you stay with one thing consistently. So you have to learn how to maintain your effort on the various wings to awakening. Contained concentration. When it gets really pleasant, when there’s a sense of pleasure, a sense of fullness, a sense of well-being that comes with the practice, it becomes a lot easier to stick with it. But the important thing is you have to stick with it when the pleasure doesn’t come, or before the pleasure has come. Which is why those different lists of the wings to awakening start with right view, conviction, desire. These are the things that get you going. Right view reminds you that there is suffering that you are causing yourself unnecessarily. But it can be cured. You can put an end to that. When you first hear that, you don’t really know it. Some people say the four noble truths are very obvious. But they’re not obvious. The idea that there can be a total cessation of suffering, where have you seen that? It’s something you haven’t seen yet. That’s where the conviction comes in. Conviction can be based on lots of things. The idea that it makes sense, that it seems reasonable, that it puts it within your power, to put an end to suffering. There are so many other teachings that say you have to depend on something else, or somebody else. So you can have lots of reasons for your conviction. That conviction can also be driven by desire. The desire can be informed by the four noble truths. It comes simply from seeing the dangers in life. There are people who are really experts at their studies. They’ve discovered that these people have a very lively sense of the dangers that come when you don’t master the skill, and the rewards that come when you do master the skill. So we’ve got to learn how to cultivate that same sense of danger and rewards. The dangers, of course, are the possibility of what the Buddha calls “further becoming.” Going through this process of becoming over and over and over again. It’s something we’ve done who knows how many times. There are times when we’ve done it well, and then not so well. And then we do it well again. You’d think that we’d learn. But each time we do it, each time we get reborn, we forgot what happened before. And often when you are enjoying the results, good processes that would lead to good becomings, you get lazy. You get complacent. And all too often we don’t see the connection between our actions and the results, in terms of pleasure and pain that we get. So it’s hard to learn. This afternoon I was going through some old photos. They were taken back in the days of film cameras. And looking at them, I thought to myself, “This person shows no promise.” I started to think, “Well, what was the problem?” One of the problems, of course, was that when you take film pictures, you have to wait a couple of weeks before you get results. And often it’s hard to see, or to remember what the setting was. What the shutter speed. So it’s hard to connect cause and effect. But then I also remember I had this tendency to take pictures and just think that my power of wanting them to be good, that would come out good. Even though I’d taken similar pictures in the past, and they hadn’t come out good. It was when I learned to learn from my mistakes that I actually became a better photographer. So this is why the Buddha recommends commitment and reflection. When things aren’t going well, ask yourself, “Well, what am I doing? Some things I do over and over again, and I know I’m going to get the same results, but somehow I think they’re going to come out different this next time.” That’s Einstein’s definition of insanity. You realize you’re going to do something new. So this is where the desire comes in. But you have to learn how to make the desire mature. You can’t just hope that by strength of willing, something is going to happen. You have to look at your actions, see what the results are, and then learn from them and think of new ways of doing things. All this has to be motivated by that sense that there are dangers, but there are also rewards—dangers in not mastering this craft. Rewards in mastering it and being convinced that you can learn from your mistakes. In terms of the dangers, the Buddha recommends a sense of sanghvega. We usually translate that as dismay or urgency, but it’s related to an adjective, sanghvega, which means terrified. So sanghvega is a sense of terror, thinking about all these rebirths that could come, and your habit of not learning from them. That’s scary. Here’s the Buddha teaching that you can learn from your mistakes, and this is why he taught in those instructions at the very beginning. You make a mistake, this is what you do. You try not to make mistakes. You try to remember what you’ve done in the past that’s worked and hasn’t worked. And don’t let your likes and dislikes get in the way. You do what works. And as for what hasn’t worked, well, you’ve got to try something else. But when you make a mistake, recognize that as a mistake and go from there. Go talk it over. Resolve not to repeat it. And have, what he doesn’t say, have an upbeat attitude that you can do this. There will come times then when trial and error turns into trial and success, because you’ve reflected well. So it has to be the conviction and the desire, but also the willingness to learn from your mistakes. This is one of the big qualities that makes a difference in your practice. If you find that you get stuck in a rut, every night you meditate for an hour here as part of the group, and you find that you tend to settle down maybe in the last five minutes. Well, it doesn’t have to be that way. What are you doing at the beginning that requires that you gradually glide down? Can’t you go straight down to the breath? Have you ever noticed when the mind does settle down, where does it tend to like to focus? You may have some ideas of where you want it to focus or think it should focus, but where does it actually like to focus? Well, go straight there. What kind of breathing does it like? Well, create that breathing right now. Some people are afraid that if they get really quiet at the beginning of the hour, they won’t know what to do with themselves for the rest of the hour. Well, that’s easy. Just maintain what you’ve got. It’s a different skill from getting there, but it’s another skill that really teaches you a lot. One of the rewards of being consistently alert is that you’re going to see things you haven’t seen before. Because one of the tendencies of the mind is when it knows certain things are going to come up, it diverts your attention someplace else. You’ve got to learn how to resist that, to see right through whatever the diversion is. And you begin to see things in the mind that you don’t want to see, but you have to see if you’re going to make any progress. So try to have that attitude that whatever comes up, you can handle it. And you may see some things in your mind that you don’t like, but you don’t have to be knocked over by them. Just take it as normal. I was talking the other day to someone who had come in and her life seemed to be full of harm that she had done to others. She seemed to resist that. Some people like to feel that they’re especially bad. They’re going to be special in something, and that’s what makes them especially bad. But you have to realize that whatever harm you’ve done, whatever bad habits you have, they’re really nothing new. The range of defilements in the mind, even though your defilements may have the tricks that are especially tricky for you, have all been dealt with in the past by other people who’ve been on the path. So it is possible to recover from whatever wounds you’ve inflicted on yourself, you’ve inflicted on others. So if you remind yourself in that area, you’re nothing special. There’s nothing to get upset about. Learn how to take these things in stride, and then you can actually deal with them. As the Chan Fung once said, “There’s no problem that comes up in meditation that can’t be cured.” The only problem that’s hard to cure is if you don’t do it. So keep at it. Learn how to inspire some desire, either through reflecting on the terrors of samsara or the rewards of nibbana, the constant process of learning about your mind, capturing your imagination. When I came back from Thailand, people would ask me, “What was the hardest thing to endure over there?” And I had to stop and think. I wanted to realize, “Hey, I have to stop and think. There’s no one thing that’s obvious.” There were difficulties, but just the idea of learning about the breath, learning about the breath energy in the body, trying to master this skill, had captured my imagination. I kept finding new things going on, new things that I was learning, because I was inquisitive. You can watch the breath for years, and if you’re not inquisitive, you’re not going to learn anything. You have to give before you’re going to get. And one of the things you have to give is a sense of interest, an ability to imagine. There’s something good here. We hear so much about how the desire for things to be different is bad. Well, the Buddha wasn’t one of the people who would say that. You’re learning about possibilities, you’re learning about potentials here in the body and in the mind. And if that can’t capture your imagination, what does? And the meditation comes down to what you give, and your ability to keep producing the desire to keep exploring further. Because there’s an awful lot to learn, there’s an awful lot to discover here in the mind. As the Buddha said, there is a deathless element. You’ve got to poke around in here, see where it is, and you’re going to learn some really unusual things about your mind. In the course of doing that. So maintain the desire, maintain the conviction. If you start seeing results, then allow those results to continue to fuel your practice. And there will be fallow periods when it seems like the results have stopped coming. Well, remember how you got started. Desire, conviction, informed by right view. A desire informed by a sense of terror but also a sense of rewards. Those are the things that will see you through.

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