Respect for Tranquility & Insight

December 20, 2024

There’s a verse we chant very often which mentions respect for concentration. We have to realize that concentration requires both tranquility and insight. We have to have respect for both of those as well. Some people find that they’re good at the tranquility and not so good at the insight. Others find that they’re the other way around. Insight comes easily. You can understand what the Buddha said about inconsistency, stress, not-self, the fabricated nature of our thoughts. But the tranquility comes hard. And there’s a tendency in both those cases to want to go with the side that you’re already talented at. But as the John Fulham would point out, we need to bring things into balance. So we have to work on whatever side you’re weak in. The Buddha says as much as well. When someone is good at tranquility, he says, go find someone who’s good at insight and ask them how should fabrications be viewed, how should they be understood, how should they be let go through insight. If you’re good at insight, find somebody who’s good at tranquility and ask how can the mind be made to settle down, to be one. Because you need both sides. You can learn the terms of insight and you can apply them. You can borrow the Buddha’s wisdom. But you want to be able to learn to create some of your own. And for that you need to get the mind really really quiet so you can step out of the formation of thoughts and see them as something other. We live so much in our thought worlds. And you can use one thought to step back from another. But how about stepping entirely out of those patterns of thinking? What would you gain? What insights would you gain then? A lot deeper. And they go more to the heart because they come directly from what you’ve seen. So we find that insight is easy, you understand what the Buddha had to say, work on your concentration and have respect for that work. It’s so easy to say when the mind gets still it’s kind of dumb and to lose interest and move off. So when it’s still, nothing much may be happening, nothing much obvious may be happening. But there’s still a lot of fabrication going on. And you want to be able to see that and you can’t see that unless the mind gets really still. You can see the blatant levels, but there’s a lot more going on in the mind. So you’ve got to get the mind still to see that. So learn how to give yourself pep talks in the concentration and have some respect for it. Sometimes we get cynical about the practice. You work and you work and you work at it. You don’t seem to be getting anywhere. And there’s that tendency to say, well maybe there’s nothing wrong with me. Maybe there’s something wrong with the practice. That’s basically laziness speaking. Other times you say, well there’s something wrong with me. I can’t do this. That’s also laziness speaking. You have to remember the Buddha said that what he taught was things that people can do. You can develop skillful qualities. You can abandon unskillful ones. If it were impossible he wouldn’t have taught it. This is a basic human characteristic. We can do these things. A lot of it has to do with how we talk to ourselves. Sometimes we come to the practice tired, at a low energy level. It seems to demand an awful lot and it does. But what that means is for the time being you have to focus on what you can do right now. And don’t look down on it. It’s especially hard for people who have skills in some areas and they want to do the things they’re skillful in. And it’s hard to go back and start over with a new skill. Because all you can see is how your skills are not measuring up to the skills of the Buddha. Remember, where did the skills of the Buddha come from? Came from very basic steps in the beginning. He took a lot of wrong steps. But he learned from them. And that’s the task we have. Learning from what we can do. Think about that image of the lute. If the string is too tight, the sound isn’t good. If the string is too loose, the sound isn’t good. So think of your level of energy and work with that. And then tune all the rest of the strings in your lute to that. Your conviction, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment. With conviction that means really being convinced that even tiny steps are good. You’re not going to stay with the tiny steps. As you make the tiny steps and you get really perceptive about what you’re doing, you’re going to take bigger steps, bigger steps. So even though the stillness or your concentration may not be all that solid, learn from what you’ve got. Don’t learn from what you think should be in the books or what should be in your mind from what you read in the books. We’re way too over-informed. We hear so many things about this should be that way, that should be this way. And there are many different branches of Buddhism that tell us many different things. It’s good to go back to the basics. Jon Foon used to comment that his favorite students were the ones who were the Chinese merchants and who worked in the market. Hadn’t read much Dharma at all. When they came to him, he’d say, “Do this.” So they would do this. And when they had done that, then he’d say, “Well, now do this.” They’d come and report on what happened, “Well, now do this.” Step by step by step. Treating it as an exploration. So try to have that same attitude. We’ve learned a lot from the Buddhist discourses, we’ve learned a lot from the teachings of the Ajahns. But you have to learn how to put those teachings aside. We hear so much about putting what’s in a Pali Canon aside and just focusing on your practice. But it also means putting what we’ve learned from the different Ajahns aside and just focus on what you’re doing right now. Have some basic concepts of what has to be done and then just do it. And then learn from it. And that’s when you find that you begin to notice what’s going on in your mind in ways you didn’t notice before. That’s what the insight is all about. As for people who find that concentration comes easily, there’s similar problems. It’s kind of easy to get still. It’s harder to figure things out. So you get that line of thought that says, “Well, maybe you shouldn’t be figuring things out.” Just sort of be with your awareness and treat that as the reality. And the words just as words. Well, the Buddhists said words because they imparted important information. They gave guidance. And they pointed out that just being with awareness is what? It’s your aggregate of consciousness. And if you stay there, you’re clinging to consciousness. You’re clinging to the aggregates. The stress may be subtle, but it’s there. In that case, you want to learn how to peer into it and see what are you doing. When does the stress go up? When does the stress go down? When does it go up? What did you do? When it goes down, what did you do? Don’t let yourself be too easily satisfied with a state of concentration. So there are dangers on both sides. The side that finds it easy to think, the side that finds it easy to be still. What you’ve got to learn is you’ve got to balance those abilities. As the Buddha said, if you’re really going to get the mind into the stages of right concentration, you’ve got to have some insight into the workings of the mind, and you’ve got to have some tranquility. You’ve got to have both. When he gives that image of the swift pair of messengers that bring the message in a bonnet to consciousness, it’s both tranquility and insight that work together. And if you find yourself leaning in one direction or leaning in the other, take the time and have the respect that’s required to bring things back into balance. And that way your practice is solid. It’s on a sure footing.

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