Do, Maintain, Use

January 31, 2025

One of Chan Phuong’s most common sense teachings is about the three stages in meditation, or three functions in meditation. One is you have to learn how to do it. Two, you have to learn how to maintain it. And three, you have to learn how to put it to use. And there’s so much in our minds that fights common sense. We like to hear that there’s nothing to do, there’s going to be concentration, it’s going to come on its own. We also don’t like to hear that we have to maintain it. When it comes and it goes, we think that we’ve learned something about impermanence. As we’re using it, we get lost. We think that if you’re going to do impermanence, in insight practice, you have to drop the concentration and then start on square one and do the insight. But it comes out of the concentration. It comes out of the doing and the maintaining. But you have to learn how to ask the right questions. In terms of doing it, you focus on the causes. You come to the meditation, you come to your object, like the breath. And then if you find yourself wandering away, you just have to come right back. It may seem that the concentration comes and goes and comes and goes without any continuity. But what you’re doing, you’re learning how to connect those moments of concentration. Each time you come back, think of it as a continuation. And you’ll find that as you’re observant, you get more and more quick about sensing when you’re about to go off and stopping, sticking with the concentration. You’re connecting things. And sometimes when meditation comes, it just seems to go on its own. Realize you chose to do something, and you can undo that choice. All too often, you can see the concentration coming, and it begins to fall away. You think, “Well, that’s what I have to just give in to, is the falling away.” You don’t. Because you did the falling away. You made a choice about what to focus on, what not to focus on. And when you can be clear about what you’re doing, you can undo that choice and come right back. You begin to realize that you’re more involved in this than you thought. Because there’s so much going on in the mind that you don’t notice. And we’re here to learn about it. There are choices being made. Value judgments being made. And you want to clearly see what’s happening. And that’s how the doing turns into maintaining. Ask for using. There’s that five-step program that the Buddha gives. For dealing with anything unskillful coming up in the mind. First is seeing its origination. Where does it come from within the mind? That’s an important insight right there, that it’s coming from within the mind. It’s not just floating past. You want to see that. And you see that in the course of trying to maintain the concentration. Because once the mind gets still, you’re not just there to enjoy the stillness. That’s one of the functions of the meditation. But if you just wallow in the comfort, you lose your focus. So if you’re going to maintain it, you have to figure out how you can continue working and get your salary at the same time. Most of us are like the person who gets a job, gets his first paycheck, and then just goes off and travels around, forgets the job. Then runs out of money and has to come back. In real life, the boss usually wouldn’t take you back. Fortunately, the mind is forgiving. It’ll take you back. But you never learn anything much. You have to learn how to be with the comfort, but not wallow in the comfort, as you focus on the breath. And that way you get to enjoy your salary and work at the same time. And one of the jobs you have to do is to see when the mind is about to leave concentration, what are the steps? In the beginning, you’re with the concentration, then you’re off. It’s like a curtain came down, and you’re in another scene entirely. Well, the curtain coming down is part of the mind’s trick. That’s ignorance right there. So you have to try to be with the steps as the mind is about to leave. And as you get better and better at realizing what’s going on, you’re beginning to see that there’s a decision made someplace in the basement of the mind, that as soon as your mindfulness lapses, they’re going to go. And they’re ready and waiting for their chance. A stirring comes in the boundary line between breath and mind. In the beginning, it’s hard to say whether it’s physical or mental. It’s a little bit of both. You can decide to slap a label on it. You can slap a perception, saying, “This is a thought about X,” and then you run with it. But you want to see that. You want to get to the point where wherever there’s a little stirring inside that boundary between the breath, energy, and the mind, you want to zap it. Keep it from going anywhere. Breathe right through it. You’re like a spider on a web. The spider’s off in one corner of the web and is ready and waiting, sensitive to the entire web, so that if a fly comes or another insect gets caught in the web, the spider immediately runs over, wraps it up, and then goes back to its original spot. That’s what you want to do. That’s how you maintain the concentration. And at the same time, you’re beginning to gain some understanding about that step of origination. When you see that if you don’t go with the thoughts that would give rise to thoughts, further thought worlds, they just pass away. So there’s the first two steps. And the next two are lure and drawbacks. It’s basically cost-benefit analysis in the mind. And when we hear about the Buddhist desire that we use that kind of analysis to see what it is we like about a particular thought, what the drawbacks are, and be willing to say no to the allure because the drawbacks are so great, it sounds too cerebral. It’s just happening up in the head. But that’s not what the Buddha means. For one thing, there’s something we’re doing all the time, just that it’s, again, down in the lower realms of the mind. And the reasons for going with the lure are pretty obscure. And there’s a part of the mind that likes to keep them obscure. Because they’re embarrassing sometimes. And so there’s a kind of a cost-benefit analysis, but it’s done in a very slip-shod way, without much opportunity for discussion. And the mind resists bringing it up to the latter day. Because that way it can go for the lure whenever it wants. Now there are times when you see that a particular desire does have drawbacks that are so strong that you’re going to have to say no. But what the Buddha’s asking you to do is to bring that whole process up into the light of day, and then to inform it with right view. In other words, there are things you do that lead to suffering, and things you can do that can lead to the total end of suffering. That broadens your range of choices. Without the third noble truth, or the fourth noble truth, we’ll be still stuck going back and forth between what we like and what we don’t like. Sometimes learning from our mistakes, sometimes not. We’re basically thinking that this is as good as it gets. This is what we have to accept. Just this narrow range of choices that we’ve set out for ourselves. And again, there’s part of the mind that likes that. Because when the range of choices is pretty narrow and not very demanding, you just go for what you like. But here the Buddha’s saying there’s something more. Total end of suffering. Total freedom. And it can be attained through your efforts. When you take him seriously, then when you look at something that’s inconstant or stressful, you can see that it really is not worth claiming it. It’s going to get in the way of that higher possibility. It’s when you take that higher possibility into consideration, treat it seriously, that’s when you’re more willing to look at the Allure, to track it down, to see exactly where it is. Because here again, the mind likes to keep it obscure. You say you desire something or desire someone. Is it really that thing? Is it really that thing? Is it really that person? Maybe it’s just a perception. We know the nature of perceptions. They’re representatives. In the same way, say that a congressman or congresswoman represents a district. Supposed to represent the voters in that district, but not all the voters voted for that person to begin with. Even for the people who voted for the congressman. It’s not their opinions that they do. It just represents them in a very general way. That’s how our perceptions function. No perception is an exact copy of what it’s supposed to represent. It’s a sketch. And it’s a sketch for a particular purpose. And the extent to which it’s true is measured by how well it serves that purpose. And it’s accurate to that extent. But there’s an awful lot that it doesn’t show. And so those are the things that create the Allure. So you’re beginning to realize you’re dealing with partial truths. You’re dealing with sketches. And you want to track down exactly where is that sketch reliable? And where is it not reliable? Even the most reliable perceptions, the three perceptions, the Buddha teaches for the sake of insight, they’re not total representations of reality. We talk about things being stressful, unpleasant, suffering. Well, they have their pleasant side as well. As the Buddha said, “If it weren’t for that pleasant side, we wouldn’t fall for them.” So it depends on what your purposes are, how you sketch them. And you begin to realize that the Allure is just a sketch. And sometimes not even an accurate sketch. Sometimes it hides itself. Like those bureaucracies where you ask, “Who made this decision?” You talk to person A and he says, “Well, person B.” You talk to person B, he says, “Oh, no, it was person C.” You talk to C, “Well, no, it was A.” The mind can’t lie to itself. As Ajahn Chah once said, “One of the things you have to learn as a meditator is how much the mind lies to itself.” And this is why we have to maintain our concentration as we’re working on discernment. Because it’s only when the mind is really still that you can see these subtleties. And then you can have an accurate and useful comparison between the Allure and the drawbacks, keeping in mind that whatever the Allure of something may be, however satisfying it may be, when you compare it to the total end of suffering, it’s still got something lacking. For our defilements, the lack is huge. For the factors of the path, it’s more subtle, but it’s there. So this is why common sense as a meditator sometimes is so hard to maintain. Not just because of the mind’s ability to lie to itself, or because of its laziness. But you have to be confident that it is something you can master. We read about the Buddha, sometimes it sounds like he’s superhuman. But remember, he taught people of all kinds. Men, women, children, young, old, rich, poor. Uneducated, uneducated. People had a good background. People had a pretty shady background. But they all wanted the end of suffering. So you have to tell yourself, “If they can do it, so can I.” And it’s something worth doing. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha talked about his awakening. And particularly about that first and second knowledge prior to the awakening. The third knowledge was what led to the real awakening. But the first and second knowledge provided the context for getting there. And also for framing your lives. That if you don’t put an end to this constant round of running after your desires, you’re going to keep on coming back, coming back, coming back. If you act unskillfully as you run after those desires, you’re not coming back in a good place. So he teaches these things, not just to impress people, or to decorate their minds. It’s to remind you that there are value judgments that you have to make within the context of this reality. And he’s teaching that it is possible. It’s possible to find your way out. So if you use some common sense as you meditate, and take the Buddha seriously, it helps sort through a lot of decisions you’re going to have to make as you practice. Both here at the monastery and when you go home. While you’re sitting with your eyes closed, when you’re walking around in the world with your eyes open. If you take this framework and keep it in mind, you’re doing the meditation, you’re maintaining it, you’re putting it to use, then you can get the most out of it.

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