Just Right

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When the Buddha was looking for the way to awakening, he started out by going to extremes. Studying with two teachers, he got himself into very extreme states of stillness, nothingness, neither perception or non-perception. But his teachers told him, “Just stay there. Do nothing else.” And he realized that didn’t work. Then he tried extremes of austerity for six years. That didn’t work. It was only after exhausting the extremes that he found the middle way, which requires discernment. What is the point of just right? It’s easy to go to extremes. You just tell yourself, “I’ll just do nothing but x and just keep at it, at it, at it, at it, at it.” But the Buddhist path isn’t just a one-factor path, it’s an eight-factor path. It was not just in meditation. It was in every aspect of life. How to go for alms, how to work around the monastery, all of these are aspects of the training. Because defilements that can hide behind your concentration can come out when you’re working or when you’re going to alms, dealing with people. So you try to have a balanced schedule. So the defilements that say hide behind your work might come up in your meditation, or the defilements that hide behind your concentration can come up in your work. The defilements that hide when you’re alone can come out when you’re dealing with people, and the defilements that hide when you’re dealing with people can come out when you’re alone. This is why it requires balance in the practice. It takes a while to adjust, to find out where that point of balance is. But that’s where the discernment lies. As I said, extremes are easy. It doesn’t take much intelligence to go to an extreme. It’s finding the point of just right. That’s a sign of discernment. And of course it’s going to be a matter of trial and error, but always remember, it’s the point of just right that we’re looking for. Even some of the Jhans who are famous for being somewhat extreme in their efforts, they all said that when the time came when the mind settled down and began to open up, there was a sense of just right, right on the border between concentration and discernment. That’s where the mind is still. But there’s a certain amount of activity going on, trying to figure out, “Where am I causing suffering? What in here is still a type of suffering, and what’s causing it?” There has to be some thinking for the concentration to produce real results. So we’re not just here doing the concentration, we’re not here just doing the thinking. In John Chah’s images of still-flowing water, it looks still on the surface. But there’s a flow underneath. And the flow should be asking yourself that question, “What am I doing that’s causing suffering? Where is the suffering here?” Be observant. Don’t just go into stillness. But at the same time, don’t spend all your time thinking, thinking, thinking outside of the stillness. In John Lee’s images of stillness, there’s holding on to a post and spinning around the post. As long as you hold on tight to the post, you can spin around and you don’t get dizzy. It’s when you let go of the post and try spinning around, that’s when you fall down. So there should be some stillness, but there also should be your powers of observation, when you can see where you’re going overboard. In what direction you’re going overboard and how to try to correct. Because an awakening or something can be done simply through force of will. We would have all awakened a long time ago. It’s discernment that makes all the difference. And the discernment is just finding that point of just right, bringing lots of things into balance. So we take our basic motivation, which is good will, a desire for happiness, a desire for happiness so we can trust, and take that as our guide. Think about the Buddha when he was going to his extremes. That was always the issue that came up, the happiness that comes from this or the peace that comes from this. Can it be trusted? The answer was no. Well, then it’s not the right one I’m looking for. So he began to look for what else could be trusted. He was hoping to purify his mind through austerities, hoping that purity itself would be a happiness that could be trusted. Well, that didn’t work either. So that was his guiding light. Is there something that can be trusted? This state of stillness I have or this state of understanding I have. He called it being discontent with skillful qualities. In other words, as long as his skillfulness wasn’t just right, he kept trying to find the point of skillfulness. And his major insight was that it lay in the point of just right, where all the factors of the path came together. So in all our activities, we try to use our discernment. And by balancing our activities, we can get different perspectives on the problem. That’s one of the reasons why we don’t sit for hours and hours and hours here. We sit, we walk, we do work. Because things will come up in the course of these different activities that you won’t see in the other activities. And John Suat noted that, for him, it was during walking meditation that his discernment would come more than when he was sitting. But this is going to be an individual matter. Because you can’t just walk all the time, you can’t sit all the time, you can’t work all the time. Try to find the right balance. That way, when the defilements are hiding out, we have places to hide. Because you keep changing the scenery, moving the furniture around, and things in the mind can come into balance. Not just by holding on to one thing and taking it as far as the extreme can go. And John Munn pointed out that our practice will tend to go off to one side or the other to begin with. It’s going to be normal. But what makes the practice progress is when you try to keep moving in to the point of just right. So learn to catch yourself when you’re going too far, and learn that lesson with good grace. Because otherwise you won’t be able to learn any lessons. And when you don’t learn lessons, then the practice doesn’t go anywhere. It’s in observing your own mistakes, realizing the mistakes, that you can learn. We all make mistakes to begin with. It’s not always normal. But the practice is learning how to recognize them for what they are, and maintaining your intention to do something about them, do something skillful about them. Try to bring as much skill and discernment and finesse to this as you can. Because the meditation job is not a crude job. It requires finesse. It’s a skill. And as in all skills, the purpose is to find the point of just right.

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