Broaden Your Repertoire

April 19, 2018

About a century ago, there was a movement in a lot of different Buddhist groups in Asia to simplify the practice, to boil it down to a few very basic practices, ideas. It may have been because they were impressed by the Europeans who had come in and taken over so much of Asia. The Europeans were very efficient. There was a belief that Asian societies had to become more efficient, and that included Buddhism. And so a lot of very simplified practices were developed. The problem is that the mind is not simple. It’s not the case that one technique or one approach is always going to work. Which is why the Buddha didn’t have a single vipassana technique or a single samatha technique. He basically had right concentration. And then as you develop it as a skill, and it’s a skill with many facets, you’re going to be dealing with lots of different problems in the mind. And then as you get past those problems, that’s when the insight develops. The thing is, it’s not the case that pain is one problem. Pain is many problems. The same with lust. Lust is not a single problem, it’s many. It’s anger, delusion, all the obstacles in the mind. And they’re going to require many different techniques. This is why it’s good as a meditator to develop a real repertoire, so that when you’re dealing with pain you don’t have a single method of dealing with pain. You learn to develop your ingenuity. And this is a large part of how dealing with these problems develops your mind. Your insight develops your discernment. You’ve got a range of techniques. The Buddha gives, for example, five techniques for dealing with distracting thoughts. But they’re just the beginning. One technique is simply to notice that the mind is wanted off from where you want it to be, and you bring it back. The second one is to think about the drawbacks of the thought that’s pulling you away from your meditation. If you allowed that thought to stay in the mind, it would really cause you a lot of trouble down the line. So why get involved with it, when at the very least you realize it’s just not worth it? The third technique is simply to ignore the thought. In other words, the thought may be there, but it’s not destroying your breath. Your breath is still coming in, going out, and you can be with it. This is where it’s good to have the image of the committee of the mind. Some members of the committee are just saying their crazy things, but you don’t have to give them the floor. You don’t have to listen to them. Let them just chatter away in their own little corner, and after a while they’ll stop because you’re not interested. The fourth method is to relax the thought fabrication. Working with the breath energies in the body is especially helpful here, because you’ll sense that when a thought forms, there’s going to be a little pattern of tension that goes along with it. And it’s that pattern of tension that allows the thought to stay anchored. If you can find it, release it, and the thought will go away. The fifth method is simply to press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and, as the Buddha says, crush your mind with your mind. In other words, use pure willpower to say, “No, I will not think that thought.” Now, I find that different thoughts that pull you away will respond to different techniques. You can’t say, “Well, I have my one favorite technique, and I’m going to stick with that all the time.” You have to be good at all five. And the five are just the main types. There are going to be lots of variations on them that you’ll develop for yourself as you meditate. And that’s how you develop your discernment. Same with dealing with pain. There are times when you have to avoid the pain. In other words, focus on the parts of the body you can make comfortable, and let the pain be in another part. You don’t have to go there. Another stage is once you’ve got a comfortable sensation in one part of the body, think if you can spread that comfortable sensation and go through the pain. Think of the breath energy penetrating the pain and going right through it. If there’s a sense that the pain is a wall, remember that breath can go through any wall. There’s nothing that really has to prevent it. And then the next step, if breathing through the pain doesn’t make it go away, then you can focus on it. Now, focusing on it, you have to ask different questions. And the questions that are going to help you gain an insight into what’s wrong with that particular pain or why that particular pain is causing trouble for the mind, the questions will be very different. So you have to have a range of questions. One is, “Is the pain the same thing as the body?” And part of the mind will say no. But you’ll be surprised to find that maybe the part of the mind is saying yes, and that’s the part of the mind that’s causing trouble. The pain has infiltrated the body, it’s occupying the body, it’s become one with the body. There will be that perception someplace inside. Remember, a lot of your perceptions around pain were first developed before you knew anything about language. You had to deal with pain from the very first moment of birth. So we may have picked up some unskillful habits or unskillful ways of understanding the pain, visualizing the pain, dealing with the pain from that time. So sometimes you have to ask strange questions. “Is the pain solid?” “Is the pain coming at you?” “Can you perceive it as going away?” Moments of pain arising, and then as they arise they go away, go away, go away, receding from you instead of coming at you. And how does that change the way you relate to the pain? We’ll use just a few examples. The important thing is that you realize that pain is not one problem. So a technique that worked tonight may not work tomorrow night. But you’ve got the basic principle that if you’re going to deal with the pain, you have to ask questions about it. The same with lust, the same with anger. You have to ask yourself, “Why do you go for these things? What is the allure of lust? What’s attractive about it? Why do you feel that having lust makes you attractive?” There are lots of different questions that you can ask. What is it that you think you’re getting out of this? When anger comes, sometimes there’s part of the mind that really likes the anger. It feels released. It’s released from its sense of shame, sense of compunction. You can just say anything. And you have to realize the reason you go for anger today may be different from tomorrow. It may depend on who you’re angry at, what you had for breakfast. Lots of different things can have an effect on why the mind suddenly feels the need to go for these things. So you have to be prepared. You may have dealt with a particular problem before, and it seems to come back again. Well, remember, it is a slightly different problem. Lust is a whole troupe of problems. Anger is a troupe. Distraction is a troupe. Just lots of them. So it’s good to have a lot of different techniques that you can pull out when you need them. This is what mindfulness is for, so you can remember what worked in the past. And the discernment is for figuring out if what worked in the past doesn’t work today, what might work in the future. How can you tweak your approach? How can you tweak your questions? It’s in this way that your meditation develops as a skill. In the words of John Lee, your discernment develops branches, branches out in all kinds of directions. It’s not a Johnny One-Note kind of discernment. It’s all around. That’s why he gave the image of a discernment as being like a circular saw blade. No matter which direction the wood comes from, the blade can cut right through it. So take note of what’s worked in the past. Use your ingenuity to figure out new approaches when the old approaches don’t work. Throw the old approaches away. Something that worked yesterday, if it doesn’t work today, it doesn’t mean it’s bad. It’s just not quite right for today’s problem. But it may work for tomorrow’s. So develop your repertoire. Think of yourself as having a toolbox, lots of different tools. If the tools you have in your box don’t work, you can learn how to make new tools. If something works, don’t throw it away. There’s plenty of room in the box for all kinds of tools. And it’s in this way that insight becomes your own. It’s not just forcing the Buddhist terms onto your mind or forcing somebody’s technique onto it. Your mind is not meat, and you’re not trying to make ground meat out of it. The mind is very complex. And even though we have many patterns of the mind in common, which is why we can talk to one another about the practice, still there will be slight variations in each person’s application of those principles. And that’s how it should be. Discernment is there for you to deal with your problems, your specific reasons for suffering, your particular passions. So you can develop dispassion. Where we all arrive is at the same place, but we may be coming at it from different directions. So try to broaden your repertoire. And that’s how your discernment can deal with whatever comes up.

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