Patient Like Earth

May 30, 2018

Jon Fuing said that when it comes to meditation there are two types of people. The people who think too much and the people who don’t think enough. For the people who don’t think enough, you have to stir them to start thinking about issues in life. Otherwise they get the mind into concentration very easily, but then they just stay there. For the people who think too much, the opposite is a problem. It’s hard to get the mind to settle down. And they have to be encouraged to keep with the concentration. The advantage of the second type, and most Westerners fall into that second type, is that once the mind finally does settle down, then the mind will immediately want to start looking into things, understanding things, what’s going on in the mind. At the same time, they know what it’s like to deal with obstacles and getting the mind to settle down, because they’ve had to deal with lots of them already. When an obstacle comes up, they’re not discouraged. The people who find it easy to get into concentration from the very beginning can sometimes run into trouble on the days when for some reason the mind is not going to settle down, and they don’t know how to handle it. So if you fall into the second type, which most of us do, take heart. All you have to do is really work hard on the concentration, and the ability to think and analyze is already there. Once the mind gets more solid, then you’ll be more ready to take on issues. Problems to tackle come up. Problems of greed, problems of aversion, problems of delusion. You really want to start thinking about them easily, because the mind has a naturally inquisitive nature. But then the question always comes, “How much concentration is needed before you start doing that?” And the answer is, “It depends.” In some cases, you can’t wait until you’ve got the ideal level of concentration. But the problem is something that’s immediate. You’ve got to deal with it. And so you deal with it as best you can, realizing that the more concentration you can bring to it, the more subtle your awareness is going to be. And if the problem requires your immediate attention, then you can deal with it as best you can. Comfort yourself with the thought, “Well, at least it’s better than not having any concentration at all. I’ll deal with it to the best of my ability.” And you find that the problems keep coming back. This is the nature of the mind. Greed, aversion, and delusion don’t have only one form each. They come in lots of forms and with lots of excuses, lots of reasons. They sneak in from different angles. It’s going to take a while to find out what all their angles are. In a case like this, the necessary quality is to have a sense of good humor. In other words, be in a good mood as you deal with problems that come up in the mind. Sometimes you think you’ve dealt with a problem and it comes back. But don’t get upset. Just say, “Well, I just probably didn’t realize I didn’t really understand the problem, so here’s another chance to deal with it again.” Learn how to give yourself pep talks. Learn how to take the long view. We hear so much about the passages in the Canon that stress how important it is to be quick and take care of things right away, right away. There’s that image of the man with his head on fire. He’s got to put the fire out as quickly as possible. But then there are other images that say, “Take your time.” Remember, we’re in this for the long haul, and that requires a kind of marathon runner’s attitude. You’re not going to sprint down to the line. You have to learn how to pace yourself and keep your spirits up as you’re slugging along. There’s the image of the cow, the foolish, inexperienced cow, who has a nice meadow on the hillside with nice water. But then she sees that there’s another hillside over across the valley that has grass, too. Perhaps its water is better than the water here. But because it’s a foolish, inexperienced cow, it goes down into the ravine, separating the two hills. It gets stuck in the ravine. It can’t get back to its first meadow, much less get to the other meadow. This stands for someone who’s got a certain amount of concentration. They say, “Well, what’s the next level of concentration? Or what’s jhana like? Why can’t I get jhana?” And you throw your concentration away. Whatever concentration is going to develop starts with little bits of concentration. It’s the concentration we already have. It’s just we’re learning how to nurture it. We all have concentration to some extent, to the extent that our handheld devices haven’t destroyed our ability to stay concentrated on anything. But we take the concentration we have and we stick with it, stick with it. Even though it may not seem much to begin with, if you give it some space, give it some time, it’ll grow. It’s like trying to start a fire on a windy day. You have to protect it, even though the fire is very small and it may stay small for quite a while. If you don’t protect it at all, the wind’s going to blow it out. You protect it and then you keep your hands cupped around it until eventually the fire takes. So you don’t try rushing through the jhana hoops. You stay with what you’ve got. You stay with the breath. Don’t even think about jhana. Think about the breath. Think about the breath and coming back to the breath. And that little bit of concentration will begin to grow. And it’ll grow at its own pace. And Chan Chah’s analogy says it’s like planting a tree. Your duty is to water the tree and to make sure that no bugs get on it and no diseases hit it. And then the tree will do the growing. In other words, you don’t grow the tree for it. You don’t try to pull it up. If you try to pull it up to make it taller, you uproot it and that’s the end of the tree. You protect what you’ve got. You look after your duties, which are to keep catching the mind when it wanders off and to bring it back and try to be as sensitive as possible to the breath right here, right now. You don’t have to worry about how many breaths you’re going to be able to stay with the breath. You say, “I’m going to be with this breath right here and try to make this breath comfortable.” And that next breath comes along, “Let’s try to make this one comfortable.” And then the next one, “Let’s try to make this one comfortable.” And before you know it, the mind is settled in. So this requires a certain patience. A realization that some things take time and you can’t rush the steps, even though you may want to take care of a problem and be done with it as quickly as possible. You say, “I’ve got to get things ready.” There’s another analogy they have in the Canon that’s kind of gruesome. There’s this old Brahmin who marries a young woman and she gets pregnant. And so he decides he wants to give a monkey to her for the baby when it comes out. And she says, “I’d like to have it dyed. I’d like to have it dyed pink if it’s a little girl and have it dyed blue if it’s a little boy.” And so the Brahmin says, “Well, how are we going to know?” And she herself isn’t patient enough to say, “Well, we can wait until the child comes out and then we dye the monkey.” She wants the monkey dyed right away. So she takes a knife and she opens her womb. Of course, she kills the fetus in the process. So the warning there is, things take time. And certain things you simply have to do. You have to allow them to take their time. Your duty is to do what you can to protect the good qualities of your mind. And when an issue comes up, you do your best to think it through. Because it’s not the case that you just do concentration, and then once the concentration is done, then you do discernment practice or insight. In the forest tradition, it’s a person walking. You can’t hop along on one foot and then hop along on the next foot. You walk. You have to use your right foot to make a step with the left, and then you use your left foot on the ground to make a step with the right. And the two help each other along. There are times when you have to think things through a little bit so the mind will be willing to settle down. Otherwise it says, “Well, I’ve got all these other issues I’ve got to think about right now.” And you think about them in a way that reminds you that the best thing you can do with your time right now is to get the mind quiet. And then once it’s quiet, issues will come up and you have to think them through. And if you do it right, then the mind gets even more quiet. The problem is that we sometimes get sick and tired of dealing with a particular issue over and over again. Well, try to get sick and tired of the issue, but don’t get sick and tired of dealing with it. Dealing with it is the only way out. So try to maintain a sense of good humor, a sense of infinite patience, that however long this is going to take, you’re ready to stick with it for the long haul. Whether it takes one year or two or how many, it doesn’t really matter. There was a woman who was a student of Ajahn Jung’s, whose concentration was actually quite good. After being with him for seven years, she said, “Well, I don’t seem to be getting anywhere.” He said, “Don’t think that. That destroys you right there, that thought. You just keep at it, keep at it.” Because there’s a lot about the meditation that you can’t measure readily. You take care of one little problem in the mind and it doesn’t seem like that much. But if you develop this as a habit, a problem comes up and you deal with it as best you can, then you put it aside and get the mind back into concentration. That habit, as it gets strengthened, puts you in a real position of strength. And even if it hasn’t yielded the results that you’ve dreamed about, remind yourself that the results you dream about come from ignorance and from not knowing the mind. Then in the course of the meditation you’re going to get to know the mind really well, both its good qualities and its bad qualities. Hopefully that’s going to be a maturing process. So for these qualities to mature, you have to take a mature attitude, that this will take time. And you’ll be as assiduous as you can in making sure that the causes are right. In other words, being mindful, being alert, being ardent. If you take care of the causes, then the results will take care of themselves. Then convince yourself that you have an infinite capacity to get the causes right. And draw on that sense of a large, infinite capacity when you need it. The Buddha uses this image to help with problems when you’re dealing with difficult people. Think of your goodwill as being as large as the earth. People can come and spit on the earth and urinate on the earth and dig in the earth, but the earth is still earth. It’s much bigger than their efforts. Your goodwill is as large as the river Ganges. People can bring torches and try to burn up the river, but the river doesn’t burn. Your goodwill is as large as space. People may try to draw pictures on space, but they can’t. There’s nothing to carry the marks. You want your goodwill to be something that doesn’t get marked by other people’s actions. Think about your patience as large. One of the words for patience in Pali is “earth,” like the planet earth. So patience as large as the earth. That doesn’t mean you’re lazy or don’t care about when things happen, but you’re in this for the long haul. Then whatever’s required and however long it takes, you’re up for it. And then as problems come up, you deal with them. And if they come up again, you deal with them again. And if they come up again, you deal with them again. Because you really want to get to know them well. So don’t be discouraged that your first efforts don’t put an end to the problem. You’re learning that they have many facets, that’s all. Be willing to have a knowledge that has many facets. And many nuances. Because that’s the kind of knowledge that gets results.

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