Tranquility, Insight, & the Brahmaviharas

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To get the mind to settle down requires both insight and tranquility. Tranquility and the desire to find a good place inside where you feel at ease, and allowing the mind to stay there. Insight in adjusting that settled mind to a place In other words, if the breath is not comfortable, what can you do to make it more comfortable? If it is comfortable, what can you do to maintain it? This requires a little bit of insight into the workings of the mind and the workings of the body. But insight does more work than that, because there are going to be lots of voices in the mind that say, “You shouldn’t be settling down.” They’ll have their other reasons. One voice says that it’s selfish for you to have some ease right now in the mind when there’s so much suffering in the world. And you need some insight in order to deal with that argument. The basic argument is that you’re not responsible for other people’s actions, you’re responsible for your own. And the extent to which you want to be able to help other people requires that your mind be strong. So the mind needs some time for itself, to be by itself, to look after its own needs. Otherwise, it’s like a machine that you just keep running and running and running all the time without adding any lubricant, without taking care of it. After a while, it’s going to break down. Then it’s not capable of doing anything at all. It’s the same with the mind. If you’re constantly worried about other people’s problems, your ability to help them starts wearing down. So for their sake as well as for yours, you want to get the mind to settle down. You want to have a sense of well-being inside. That’s your strength. So that when the time does come to help other people, you’re there, you’re ready, capable, strong enough. And you’ve come from enough stillness so you can see things clearly. So try to develop both the tranquility and the insight that allow the mind to settle down. And you’ll find that as the mind settles down, has a sense of well-being, the tranquility grows stronger, the insight grows sharper. But the sense of having the centered mind is central to every aspect of developing the path and every aspect of doing well for the world. We follow the path to overcome our own suffering. And as the Buddha said, you can’t get on the path without being generous. And generous here means giving not only of your material belongings but also of your time, your energy. Your knowledge, your forgiveness, your goodwill. So the good we do in the world helps with settling the mind down, and settling the mind down helps with the good of the world. The two things go together. And as the concentration gets deeper, it’s able to withstand some of our insights about the world. We want there to be happiness, as we said, in the jhana and goodwill. May all beings be happy. But it requires some discernment in order not to suffer from that wish. We wish that for our own sake and for the sake of others. For our own sake is because we want to make sure that in our dealings with other people we don’t do anything unskillful. Because that harm will come back to us. And we do it for others, of course. And we need to treat them well. But we also have to realize that they have to look after themselves with ease. Because happiness doesn’t come simply because you wish it for yourself or you wish it for other people. Those other people have to do what they can to try to understand the causes for true happiness and make themselves willing and able to act on them. And that’s something that’s beyond your control. You can try to be a good influence, but there comes a point where there’s only so much you can do. That’s why the Brahma-bharas include not only goodwill and its corollaries, compassion and empathetic joy, but also equanimity. Because when we say, “May all beings be happy,” we can’t expect that all beings will be happy. When the Buddha was asked if all beings would eventually go to awaken, he wouldn’t answer. The person who asked the question seemed to get a little upset, so Ananda took him aside and said, “The Buddha is like the gatekeeper of a fortress. He goes around the fortress and he doesn’t see any opening into the fortress, even big enough for a cat to go through, aside from the gate.” Having seen that, though, he doesn’t know how many people are going to come in and out of the gate. All he knows is that if they’re going to come in and out of the gate, you have to do it through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha doesn’t determine how many people are going to gain awakening. After all, we have freedom of choice. You have your freedom of choice, other people have theirs. And the fact that they have that freedom means that they can do anything they want with that. There’s that element of the whole rest of the world that lies totally beyond your control, which is why we have to have equanimity. Equanimity is not swayed by the things that we can’t control. Here again, the concentration and the discernment help, or the insight and the tranquility help. The tranquility allows you to find a sense of well-being, even though you have to put aside your hopes for certain people, for certain situations. And the insight reminds you why. We’re all individuals. We’re all independent operators. We each have freedom of choice. We each have our karma, both past karma and present karma. And no matter how much we’d like the world to be a certain way, people are going in all sorts of directions with their choices. And as we see, when someone tries to force his or her will on you, and everybody around, they can cause even more suffering, even though you may think that you have good intentions for everyone. But if you try to force your will on other people, you don’t know where they’re going to go or what it’s going to do to them. There’s only so far that your efforts to help the world can go before they can start doing harm. So that’s an area where we have to have equanimity as well. So what it comes down to is the fact that we have to develop both insight and tranquility. And the tranquility, the sense of getting the mind to settle down with the breath, the sense of well-being filling the body as you breathe in a way that feels good throughout the body, you protect that both with tranquility and insight. The insight that reminds you that this is an important strength and it’s not selfish. This provides the foundation from which you act into the world. So you want that foundation to be good. And the tranquility soothes the mind, gives a sense of well-being that is your strength. So these divisions that we tend to make between insight and tranquility, between the good and inner good, a lot of times they’re false dichotomies. When you practice well and practice rightly, insight and tranquility go hand in hand, your well-being and the well-being of others go hand in hand, with the realization that you can do only so much outside. The real work is inside. Even though you can’t control other people, you should be able to get some control over your mind. This is why the Buddha said equanimity is not to be used at all times. You use it for things that you can’t control, but you look for the areas where you can and do your best there. And maybe someday, by doing your best inside, it’ll have an impact outside. But where and when? That’s something that you can’t control. But you can get some control over your mind right now, when the Buddha has people focus on the present moment. It’s not simply because it’s a nice place to stay. It’s because there’s work to be done here, good work to be done. This is where all the work is done—learning how to develop some strength in the mind through insight and tranquility. And whatever work you can do beyond that, it’s all for the good.

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