The Virtues of Consistency

July 11, 2019

Consistency is a quality that gets underappreciated in our society. If you’re consistent in your help for other people, after a while they take you for granted. As I was mentioning this afternoon, there was even a psychologist who taught positive psychology who recommended that people be inconsistent in their help so that they’d be appreciated. But the question is, is your goodness there only to be appreciated, or do you want it to be really good? When you’re consistent, you know. There are times when you have to put out extra effort, and you should appreciate it and realize you’re developing a good quality that you’re going to need in the meditation. There’s a lot of what the Buddha calls “directed thought and evaluation.” In other words, you have to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. And there are questions. How’s the breath going? Where do you feel it? Is it comfortable? Could it be more comfortable? What would you do to try to test what different ways of breathing might be comfortable right now? There’s questioning. There’s a little bit of a doubt, uncertainty. When things do get comfortable, then you should be ready to settle down. At that point you can drop the uncertainty and just be with the breath and develop a quality that the Buddha calls “internal assurance.” You have a sense that you belong here, you know that it feels good, and you’re confident that you can stay here. That’s the direction toward which we’re moving in the meditation. We use the thinking. But you don’t have to spend the whole hour thinking about the breath, questioning the breath, experimenting. Now, there are times when, say, you have a physical illness or discomfort that you’ve got to work with. But there should come a point where you say, “Okay, enough. We’re not here trying to develop the perfect breath. We’re trying to develop a breath that’s good enough to stay with.” And then you can drop the chatter. Another quality you develop as you drop the chatter is what the Buddha calls “unification of awareness.” There’s a sense that your awareness and the breath are one thing. Wherever there’s breath, there’s awareness. Wherever there’s awareness, there’s breath. Eventually they’ll part ways, but for the time being you want to keep them together. Because when they part, they’ll part in a natural way, not because of some preconceived notion you have about where your awareness is and where your breath is. They’ll part because they both grow very, very, very still. That stillness comes from where? It comes from this quality of consistency in the mind. It comes from doing what needs to be done. And John Ford noted that there’s a difference between getting the mind in position and then keeping it in position. The skills are a little bit different. When you’re getting it, there’s still a fair amount of thinking that goes on. But when you’re keeping it, the only thinking that should go on is simply, “What’s pulling me away? How do I stop it? How do I not get interested? If there’s something good here, how do I maintain it?” Once you get a sense of how to maintain it, then you really are at one with the breath. There’s a sense of being at home. This is what consistency is for. You don’t want a home like the vimana betas. They’re the kind of people who were good half the time and not good half the time during their human lives. So they become hungry ghosts. They have their palaces, they have their mansions, but they can only stay there a certain part of the day. The rest of the day they have to wander around outside. When you’re building a home, you want a home that you can depend on, a home that’s consistent. In this case, you’re building a home for the mind, making the breath a home. So you want to be consistent in how you deal with the breath. Part of the mind will say, “Where’s the variety here? Where’s the entertainment?” Well, the entertainment is in the first stage, figuring out the breath energies in the body. That’s where you use your intelligence. But it’s a different kind of intelligence to stay here. It seems kind of dumb. You’re not doing anything new, just sticking with it, sticking with it, sticking with it. But there’s a wisdom that underlies that. Because when the mind is really steady, then the slightest unsteadiness is something you’re going to notice. Insight starts with insight into inconstancy. Then if you’re not constant, you’re not going to see anything else as being inconstant. It’s as if you were in a boat and you’re not stable in the boat. And you look at other people and you can’t really tell whether they’re stable or not. You can make a comparison with doing a scientific experiment. You can have the most sensitive equipment, but if it’s on a table that wobbles, the results of the experiment are going to be useless. Because when the indicators wobble, you don’t know whether they’re wobbling from what you’re trying to study or whether they’re wobbling from the table. And the same with the mind. If the mind isn’t constant, then the little inconstancies of a little thought here or the germ of a perception there are going to go right past you. They’re part of the general blur. So try to develop this insight. This quality of constancy strengthens your concentration and provides the basis for insights to arise. We talk about trying to see what’s going on in your subconscious. It makes it sound like there’s a basement to the mind. But actually it’s more little things that happen, little tiny flashes of a thought. And one part of the mind will pick up that little flash of a thought and do something with it. Whereas the CEO, you watching things, doesn’t know what’s going on. You’re too slow. It’s like the arpeggios that birds sing. Some of them are so fast that our ears can’t catch up with them. We just hear them as a chord. There are fast things going on in the mind. The subconscious is very fast, but it’s not under the surface. It’s right there on the surface. And the only way you’re going to see these things is if you make the surface very, very still. And that comes from the constancy of your focus, the constancy of your attention, your alertness. So see the virtue of constancy in your daily life. And then you should carry it into your meditation. Because the lessons you learn in being constant in daily life are the same ones you need in the meditation. Say you take a vow for the rains retreat. There are some days when it’s going to be hard. But how do you muster the strength and muster the determination that you’re going to do it even when it’s hard? How are you going to muster the strength even when nobody notices? When you figure that out, then you can figure out how to keep your concentration constant. It’s the same sort of thing. Just that in this case it’s an inside job. But the qualities of mind you learned on the outside will be helpful here.

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