Stamina

October 16, 2019

Practicing the Dhamma is like being a long-distance runner. You have to pace yourself. Find a pace that you can maintain. And you need to find a source of inner strength to give you stamina. And concentration plays a large role in that stamina. When we’re building the Jetty at Wat Dhammasettit, Jon Foong’s students would sometimes work all night. We had a cement pouring. Sometimes they’d go to midnight, sometimes they’d go to dawn. Jon Foong encouraged them to meditate while they were raking in the gravel, raking in the sand, mixing the cement, forming part of the bucket brigade, and so on. They should keep the meditation word in mind, keep the breath in mind. In fact, one of the students who was an engineer put this big sign up that flashed, “Buddho, Buddho.” People found they could stay all night and not get tired. There was one time, though, they went to another monastery. One of the monks who had come to help with the project needed some work done at his monastery. So everybody went there. And they found out that after an hour or two of a similar sort of job, they were all exhausted. They had lost their center. So as you practice, you have to realize that getting the mind centered with a sense of well-being is going to be essential for maintaining your stamina. So take the time to get to know the breath, because the breath is going to allow you to settle in once you get to know it, once you learn how to read the needs of the body. When it needs long breathing, when it needs short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. So that as soon as you focus on the breath, you can get it comfortable. That’s what you’re looking for. And then learn how to protect it. And the protecting will require mindfulness and it’s going to require discernment. Mindfulness is to keep on remembering that this is where you want to stay. It’s so easy to forget, especially when you’re out in the outside world. Lots of other things are going on. You’re dealing with other people. And just the simple fact that there’s a lot of activity going on that can distract you. And then on top of that, there are people’s values. This is where the discernment has to come in. When you realize you’ve got something more important here than people liking you or connecting with people, you’ve got the state of your mind that you’ve got to protect. Because after all, this is what’s going to go with you when you die, and nobody else can do the work for you. And the fact that they like you or the fact that they feel connected with you, that’s not going to help you. This is a job that you’ve got to do. And so you have to have a strong sense of the value of what you’re doing here. As Ajaan Fuang would often say, “We’re nobody’s servant. Nobody hired us to be born.” So as long as our priorities are harmless, our priorities have to come first. You can’t let the opinions of the world come in and insist that you make them more important, because nobody else can vouch for the state of your mind. It’s your direct responsibility to keep that in mind. And so with this combination of mindfulness and discernment, you can protect your concentration. And as you protect it, your mindfulness gets developed, your discernment gets developed, as well. Because you begin to see what are the issues that pull you away. Sometimes there’ll be things you expect. Sometimes there’ll be things you don’t expect. Something knocks you off balance, comes out of left field. So you want to note that. Realize, “Okay, my mind has this opening here, this weak spot that I didn’t know about before. That’s a good thing to know.” But you don’t just stop with that knowledge. You try to figure out, well, how do you protect against it? That’s one of the reasons why we study the Dhamma. To give us a proper sense of priorities and some warning about how our defilements may have tricks that they play on us. And they use other people to justify those tricks. But then, of course, each of us has his or her own tricky defilements, his or her own strategies that greed, aversion, and delusion use. So you have to be alert. And you have to be ready for the unexpected. But in the meantime, you want to maintain your center. When you’re out in the world, it’s difficult to have a full body of awareness. Or to be aware of every in-breath and out-breath. But you can have one center in the body. That’s your sensitive spot. Try to notice where in the body seizes up before the other parts. Say, when anger comes in, what seizes up? When fear comes in, what seizes up? And then protect that spot as much as you can. Make sure that it is always open, regardless. If that one is kept open, then it’s okay. That helps keep the other breath channels in the body open as well. It’s contagious. It spreads throughout the body from that spot. For a lot of people, it’s the tip of the breastbone, but it might be in front of the stomach. Or anywhere in the body that you find is your sensitive spot that reacts most quickly. So you’ve got to counteract that reaction. So you approach the protection of your concentration both as awareness, as a physical issue—in other words, where in the body you stay focused, how you keep the energy open—and as a mental issue. What are the issues that can knock you off when people say certain things? Why is it that some things have no effect on the mind at all and other things can have a huge effect? Sometimes it’s a matter of the person who says them. Sometimes it’s what they say. As you go through the world, you have to have a sense that you’re almost going into battle. You’ve got something really valuable, and it seems like everything out there wants to destroy it. And the problem is, you’ve got a fifth column inside that seems to want to destroy it as well. So keep alert all around. Try to maintain your center. Have a sense that it’s precious. And the more you can make it comfortable, the more it is obviously precious. And this helps to maintain your stamina. That’s another part of the practice, is having a strong sense that you’re in this for the long haul. A lot of people come and they get results very quickly. They start meditating and then they hit a plateau and nothing much seems to change. What’s actually happening is they’re beginning to grow into the territory that they explored. But nothing new and exciting is happening. That’s when you have to be confident that this is not just a short-term thing. You’re not in it just to have a quick hit of pleasure from the meditation. You’ve got long-term problems. As long as the mind is still causing itself suffering, there’s still work to be done. And remember that patience is one of the barnamis. It’s one of the perfections. So you work on your stamina, you work on your patience, you work on your endurance. These are all good things to have. Not only for the sake of your meditation, but for other issues in life where it’s going to require that you stick with something for the long haul. It’s only in this way that you can make something out of your life. You’re willing to commit. You see that something is wise and something is good. And you look around and it’s hard to see other things that are more valuable than the practice. And you realize that to commit to this you’ve got to be true, but you also have to learn to give up certain things. This is why learning how to have a calm mind in the midst of all this is going to help see you through. Sometimes people will come to Jon Fruings and say, “I’ve been meditating X number of years and there still seems to be more work to be done.” He says, “Don’t think about the amount of time it’s taken. Think instead about the numberless aeons through which you’ve been suffering. The amount of time you’ve been practicing is a lot less. And don’t think about how much longer the path is going to take. Because if you’re not on the path, the cycle of rebirth for people who are not on the path is a lot longer.” So be confident that you’re on a good path. And it is a path that has an end. It comes to a conclusion. The work of the world has no end at all. Nietzsche in one of his writings has the image of birds flying, and they finally get to the point where they’re exhausted. And they just squat down on a rock or whatever they come across. And it’s not that they’ve reached their goal. It’s simply that they’ve run out of energy. That’s the work of the world. People stop, not because their work is done, but simply because they have no more energy to do it. But the work of the Dhamma does come to an end. All those who have gained awakening say, “It is total completion.” That’s the only thing in life that offers completion, that offers closure. So even though it may seem long, it’s not nearly as long as not practicing. Always keep that point in mind.

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