For the Sake of the Skill

February 3, 2020

When I went back to Thailand to ordain, I spent some time with the Chan Fung in Bangkok as he was teaching laypeople to meditate. He had one uncanny ability, which was that if something was happening in somebody’s meditation, he would sense it and question about it right there. If there were visions or light or whatever, he’d ask them. They’d say, “Oh yeah, just now.” He’d say, “Okay, this is what you do with it.” So hearing about all the visions and all the lights, I began to wonder when I was going to have any, and they didn’t seem to be coming. So I figured out my concentration must not be any good. So I basically threw away whatever concentration I had and tried to find something else. What I had to learn was that you start with what you’ve got. It may not seem like much, but you protect it. It’s like starting a fire on a windy day. You cup your hands around the little tiny flame, and it doesn’t look like it’s ever going to catch, but it does. Appreciate it, protect it, and it will grow. It’ll finally get to the point where you don’t have to protect it so much. So don’t overlook the little moments of concentration, because deeper concentration comes from stitching together ordinary concentration, the kind of concentration where you can listen to a Dhamma talk and make sense out of it, or read a book and make sense out of it. That’s called momentary concentration. And you stitch those moments together and it becomes deeper. It builds up momentum. And then when you’ve got it, you maintain it. You don’t tell yourself, “Well, I know what concentration is like now. I’ve had a little hit and it feels nice. I feel rested. Let’s go on to something else.” You’ve got to maintain it. It’s like a little child. After crawling and finally standing up and finally learning how to walk, the child would say, “Okay, I’ve walked.” As if that were the end of the matter. The child has to keep on walking because there are things to be gained by walking again and again and again. And the walking itself becomes something you understand better. You may notice when a child first starts to walk, it’s not quite sure which of its muscles are necessary and which ones are not. So it moves its arms around. It holds parts of the body tight and tense. Then it doesn’t really have to. And it’s only with time that it begins to realize that those extra movements, those extra patterns of tension, are unnecessary and actually get in the way of walking well. And then a lot of people decide, “Okay, I can walk normally.” And then they turn their attention to something else. Some people, however, train themselves even further. I know a woman in Thailand who’d been trained in classical Thai dancing ever since she was a child. She was extremely graceful in the way she walked. It was all very natural. Her hand gestures were very expressive. And it was the result of having worked on simply learning how to move the body with a lot of skill. So put the sake of the skill of your own meditation, once you’re able to develop a sense of rapture, a sense of pleasure, work on maintaining those things. Because they serve a lot of purposes. And you’ll learn a lot about the mind in the process. Don’t tell yourself, “Well, I’ve meditated. I’ve had a little bit of concentration. I’ve had a little bit of rapture. Now I can go on.” Where are you going on to? You want to get to know that sense of rapture really well, the sense of pleasure really well, the sense of being centered, not easily knocked off. That becomes a real skill only with time. So for the sake of the skill, work on it, hold it, maintain it. People may say that you’re stuck on concentration. But if you’re inquisitive about what you’re doing, you’re not stuck. You’re actually progressing on the path. Because the question always is, “How much longer can I maintain this? And how can I maintain it in a way that’s not expending a lot of energy?” In the beginning, it’s like that little child just learning how to walk. You’re holding the mind. You’re holding the mind in ways that add extra stress, extra burdens to it. So you’ve got to learn how to look at the concentration and see, “What activities of the mind can I drop and still maintain the concentration?” This increases your sensitivity. And at the same time, of course, you’ll be seeing the things that tend to knock you off much more clearly. That part of the mind that says, “Okay, this is enough,” ask it, “Why? Where do you want to go now? What do you want to feed on now? What’s wrong with feeding on concentration? Getting to know it.” Because that’s one of the purposes of concentration, is that you’ll see things knocking you off. It’s when you set up an intention and try to maintain it that you begin to see random intentions in the mind that would have slipped under the radar otherwise. It’s only when you set up an intention that other things will run into it. Otherwise, you’re like a boat on a river without any anchor. The currents will move it around, and if you don’t have any point of reference, you’re not really sure whether you moved up or down or back or forth. Trying to maintain the concentration, trying to maintain your sense of a center, gives you a point of reference. That way you can see things moving, and you can see what direction they’re moving in. And even if nothing seems to be happening, you do it for the sake of the skill. Years back I was in an airplane, and apparently there’d been an orthopedic surgeon conference in the city I was coming from. There were two orthopedic surgeons sitting in the room in front of me, one young one and one old one. The young one had just graduated, and he was telling the old one that he didn’t see any need for continuing education. What he’d learned in school was good enough that he should be able to see him through the rest of his career. And the older surgeon said, “No, things keep progressing. For the sake of this skill, keep learning new things.” I don’t know if the younger surgeon took the message to heart or not, but it was a good message. Because the more you focus on mastering a skill, the more it takes out of you, the more it requires from you. And that’s when you begin to see the mind’s resistance as you try to overcome it. If you didn’t try to overcome it, you would never notice it. It just would seem the natural way of things and go unquestioned. There are ways in which meditation is natural, and in other ways it’s very unnatural. It’s natural in the sense that you’re working on something that promises pleasure, promises well-being. The mind likes well-being. You’re working on a very natural impulse, a very natural motivation. But then the natural way of the mind in looking for happiness is to look for happiness in things that will age, grow ill, and die. And the mind will suffer from aging, illness, and death, and rebirth and redeath over and over again. That’s the natural way. So in this sense, we’re doing something unnatural. We’re looking for something that does not change. And we’re forcing the mind to give up a lot of things that otherwise it would naturally flow to. We’re going against the flow. Of course, a lot of what passes for nature is simply a force of habit. But it’s always good to question your habits. That’s how the Buddha found awakening himself. He kept questioning things. He didn’t have the path laid out in front of him. He had a few intuitions and he would try them out. And then he would gauge the results of his actions. If it hadn’t worked, he’d try something else. If that didn’t work, he’d try something else again. His desire for happiness was natural, but it was uncommon in its persistence, in its demands, and in the standards that he set for himself. So try to set high standards for yourself. Question things that you take for granted. One of the best ways of doing that is to get the mind into concentration and then try to keep it there and see how the mind responds. Learn which of its responses are useful and which ones are not. This is a good skill for sorting things out in the mind. So do whatever’s needed to master it.

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