Observing Your Ups & Downs

July 7, 2020

When you meditate, the mind has three functions. There’s the doer, the part of the mind that actually does the causes, does the work. There’s the observer, watches the results of the work, and watches the work in progress. And there’s the enjoyer, the part of the mind that wants to get some pleasure out of this. Either the simple, immediate pleasure of the breath feeling good, the mind settling down, or the long-term pleasure of seeing the practice progress. Now the enjoyer gets upset when things are not going well. The mind isn’t settling down. There’s no sense of well-being. It’s hard to find some quiet. And it’s at that point that the frustrated enjoyer begins to move in, so that the observer gets blocked. He observes a little bit, observes that things are not going well, but that’s as far as it gets. The enjoyer starts complaining. Complaining about the meditation, complaining about you as a meditator. You can find fault with all kinds of things. That’s what you have to watch out for, to make sure that the enjoyer doesn’t take over, doesn’t hijack the observer. Because you have to remember, we’re here to put an end to suffering, and that’s going to require learning about the mind. An important part of learning about the mind is watching it when it’s not obeying. When things are not going well, you have to remember that the mind is a complex phenomenon. And John Lee compares it to a large tree with lots of branches. It grows a lot more slowly, and sometimes it looks like it’s not growing at all. It’s just gathering its strength for its next bit of growth. Unlike a banana tree, a banana tree has basically one stalk, it shoots up, gives its fruit, and then it dies. You can see it growing quickly. In fact, if you cut off the stem of a banana plant, you come back in an hour or two, you can see that a little shoot has already come up about a couple inches. It’s that fast, that determined. But in the long term, it’s going to die. In the meantime, what you want is that large tree that provides shade, provides fruit, and that’s going to take time. And as you can imagine, its DNA is a lot more complex, which requires that lots of things are going to happen all at once. The mind is like that. It’s even more complex. So you want to be able to observe when things are not going well. Exactly what does it mean it’s not going well? Is it the mind? Is it the breath? What are the causes? You want your observer to be active. You can’t let the enjoyer move in. The problem is, the enjoyer isn’t moving in not only when things are not going well, it moves in when things are going well. The mind settles down, things seem to be going according to plan, and the enjoyer just kicks in. And here again, the observer gets pushed out of the way, gets hijacked. We don’t think too much about analyzing when things are going well, why they’re going well. Of course, you don’t want to do too much analysis in the course of the meditation, but it is good to take stock afterwards. Ask yourself, when the mind settled down, where was it focused? What was the breath like? What had you been doing up to that point? These are the things you want to notice. So even though we’re aware of the problem most strongly in the midst of a down, the problem also comes from when things are going well, when the meditation is going up. So in both cases you have to be very wary. Remember, the pleasure will take care of the body. That’s one of the purposes of having the meditation, to give you a sense of well-being. But you don’t want that sense of well-being to take over. In other words, you don’t want to lose your focus on the breath and lose your focus on the fact that you’re here to learn about the mind, both in its good moments and its bad. Otherwise, you’re like a mother who’s got a child, and when the child is adorable, you love having it, and then when it starts crying or starts soiling its diapers, you decide you want to throw it away. It’s not the child you wanted. Well, it’s the same child, just different aspects of the same child. If you really want to get to know your child, you’ve got to know it all around, care for it all around, because it’s precisely when meditation is not going well, that’s when your observer should be most active. You should be informed not by the enjoyer, but by mindfulness and alertness, the lessons you’ve learned from the past, all the lessons you’ve learned from the Dhamma. That’s the other problem with the times when the mind is down. It all becomes pretty much a story of you, your meditation, your mood right now, your problem right now. We tend to forget that the mind does follow large patterns. That’s what the Dhamma is for, to remind us about the larger patterns, to pull us out of the particulars of why we’re upset right now, or why things are not going well right now. Look into what’s the Buddha’s prescription for mind states like this. How does he have you deal with hindrances? How does he have you deal with frustration? He has a whole set of duties. Suffering is to be comprehended. How do you comprehend it? Well, part of it is learning how to watch it. To see where the clinging is, what kind of clinging, which aggregates are involved. So when frustrated voices come up, analyze them in those terms. Don’t go along with them. Don’t believe them. This is how you prevent them from hijacking the observer. The observer turns on them and uses its tools. The tools it’s gotten from the Buddha, the tools it’s gotten from its past experiences. And that way, even a bad meditation becomes a good one. And then you have to remember to use the same tools for when things are going well. When something’s going well, how do you maintain it? And as you leave meditation and you’ve looked at it, don’t you say, “Well, that was a nice meditation,” and wrap it up? See if you can maintain it. John Fulmer made the comment that the people who meditate well are the ones who don’t meditate only during the group periods. They go back to their places after the group periods and they continue. They try to pick up where they left off. So try to feed your observer well. Feed it with the Dhamma and give it priority. Use it to analyze. Analyze the doer. Use it to analyze the enjoyer, both when the enjoyer is content and when the enjoyer is frustrated. And that gives you some distance from a lot of the problems in the mind that otherwise would overwhelm you. It’s learning how to deal with the dangers of the mind, both when things are going well and when they’re not going well. That’s how you become a master of the meditation. That’s how you learn about the mind. The meditation becomes a skill. And you can maintain the mind on an even keel. When Ajahn Mahaprabhu talks about the Pali term ekagatha, which is usually translated as singleness, he gives an interesting interpretation. He says it’s the mind on an even keel that doesn’t get upset. As he says, the mind doesn’t swell when things are going well and doesn’t get deflated when things are not going well. It’s able to stand apart and keep watching, take note, learn, apply lessons that it’s learned from the past in an attitude that it can carry through not only through the meditation but through all your daily activities. That’s when the various voices of the mind come up. You’re not so easily swayed. You learn how to take them apart. This is how we step back from our clingings, our beliefs about the world, our beliefs about who we are, our beliefs about how we should act to get what we want. It’s when we can step back from them that we can begin to comprehend them. That takes the particulars of our experience and brings them in line with the duties of the First Noble Truth to comprehend the suffering, comprehend the clinging aggregates. The term sounds strange, but it’s what you’re doing all the time. You’re doing clinging aggregates all the time. And when you can look at them from the perspective of the trained observer, you can begin to see how precisely the Buddha described suffering and how his analysis was right on target to give the results that we want, not just to stop with the comprehension of suffering but to the realization of its end.

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