Calm & Collected

October 27, 2020

The Buddha often talks about how we should bring three qualities to the practice. We should be ardent, alert, mindful. But there’s one passage where he plays a variation on that. He says that when you’re trying to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities, or when you’re trying to develop skillful qualities, when you’re trying to learn how to overcome pain, there are three qualities you need. You should be ardent, adept, and mindful. Adept here means that you learn how to do this skillfully. You have to think about how you become adept at anything. And one of the most important qualities is that you come to the practice with a cool and collected attitude. You might say, “Well, I’m practicing concentration to get cool and collected.” Think about any skill that you’ve developed. You already have these qualities in mind to some extent. Just bring them to this practice, too, when you’re working with any manual skill. You’re going to make mistakes. You have to recognize the mistake, but at the same time not be blown away by it, realizing that you have another chance. The next time around, you’re not going to make the same mistake. And you may make another mistake, but if you have a calm and collected attitude, you can learn from the mistake and move on. So when the meditation is going well, don’t get too excited. It is necessary to be ardent, and there’s an element of enthusiasm that goes into the ardency. Remember, when the Buddha talks about the basis for success, he talks about desire. The desire has to be well-tuned, so it’s not too strong, not too weak. It’s focused properly. You’re focused on the causes. So you’re trying to remember, when things go well, how did you get there? And don’t be too quick to leave that state. We have regular meditations here, and after an hour the timer will ring. But that doesn’t mean you have to stop meditating. You can bow down, get up, go back to your place. But try to keep focused on your breath all the time. Keep focused inside all the time. Maintain your center. And see what knocks you off. If you simply stop at the end of the hour and say, “I’ll come back to this in my next session,” well, you may miss something in the meantime. When things are going well, try to stay with it. Try to maintain it in as many different circumstances as you can. That’s one way in which you get familiar with it. And when things are not going well, again, try to be calm and collected. If you let yourself get frustrated, that blows it right there. Stop, take a couple of good long deep in- and out-breaths, and if need be, go back to square one. Just the in-breath, the out-breath, puto, puto. And as for how good the meditation was before, just put that aside. Because at the moment it’s simply a memory, and the memory is getting in the way. When things aren’t settling down as fast as you’d like, you get frustrated because you’re not measuring up to the new standard you have. So put that standard aside. Just go back and focus on the causes. I think it was because of the causes that you got the good meditations that you’ve had in the past. And this way you actually do become adept at the meditation. It does become a skill. It may take time, but the more you can bring a calm and collected mind state to the meditation, the faster it’s going to go. In other words, the more patient you are, the faster it’ll go. The more impatient you are, the more you pull things out, draw things out. So there’s a paradox. The more patient you are about the results, the more quickly they’ll come. So you have a good, impatient reason for being patient. But there are a lot of paradoxes like this in the practice. So take advantage of it, realizing that as long as you stay calm and collected, things will have a tendency to go much better. This applies not only to the meditation, but to life in general. When situations are difficult, when situations change radically, it’s the people who are calm and collected who handle it best, most skillfully. As the Buddha said, those are the three areas where you want to be calm and collected and adept. When there’s pain, when the unskillful qualities come into the mind, you want to get rid of them, and you want to be calm and collected about developing skillful qualities in their place. The pain here can be physical pain, but it can also be emotional pain, mental pain. There’s a lot of that going around right now. You hear people talking about pandemic fatigue, covid fatigue. It’s not just fatigue, it’s depression. Depression is what? It’s repressed anger. There’s a lot of pain going around, a lot of mental pain in addition to the physical pain. So you don’t want it to wear you down. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. It’s soothing for the mind, soothing for the body. It gives you a source of strength. So be cool and collected as you work with the breath. And that will enable you to be cool and collected as you deal with problems outside as well.

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