Going Through the Day

March 15, 2021

The Buddha has a phrase for what he calls “lap wisdom.” It’s to describe people who sit and listen to a Dhamma talk, and then when they get up, they forget it completely. It’s as if it were something that was placed on their lap. And when they have no more lap, it falls on the ground. A lot of people also suffer from lap concentration. You’re sitting and meditating, the mind begins to settle down, and then you reach the end of the meditation period. You get up, and concentration falls out of your lap. You’ve got to do what you can to keep it going through the day. And it’s a different skill from meditating with your eyes closed, because you’re going to be doing two things at the same time. This is one of the reasons why we do walking meditation, so that when you get up from sitting meditation, you can maintain your center. And then from there, walk around, maintain your center while you’re walking. You tend to notice that as you’re doing walking meditation, walking back and forth, there will be times when the mind wanders off. So it’s good each time you reach the end of that walking path. Stop, turn around, check to see if your mind is there, and don’t move until you’re ready to know that the mind is at its center. It’s good to have a center that doesn’t move very much, which is why it’s good to focus on the area around the heart, the area around the sternum, the abdomen, someplace that lowers your center of gravity so you’re not just in your head. And then try to maintain that as you do other activities. And don’t think of it as simply one more thing you have to add to what you’re doing. It’s more that you’re giving yourself a grounding, a foundation. Most of the time we go through the day without a foundation. Like a person on a river where the ice is breaking up. You suddenly find yourself having to jump from one ice flow to the next. And it’s hard to maintain your balance. You often fall into the river. But if you give yourself a grounding, the image the Buddha gives is of having an island in the middle of the river. You’ve got the body in and of itself right here, your sense of the body right here. And even though you may not be able to keep track of when the breath is coming in, when it’s going out, still you can have a sense of a center. That you maintain, that you take as your foundation. So when you’re talking to other people, you’re with your center. You may find that you can’t come up with clever replies to what they have to say quite as much because you’re working so much on your center. But then no one ever gained awakening with clever replies. You’re working on a skill that’s more important. And choose a center that’s sensitive to changes in the breath. So if you sense any tightening up at that center, you can release it right away. And the fact that you’re right here means that you’re on top of things in the mind. Again and again and again, people complain. They find themselves suddenly overwhelmed by anger and they have no idea where it came from. It’s because they weren’t really here. Or if they were here, they were here only in an unbalanced way, like the person on the ice floe. But if you’re more solidly based, you’re on your island. Little things come up on the island, you know. You’re there right at that moment. And if there’s nothing else going on in your immediate task for the day, you can do something about that. Release them right away. If you’re in the midst of something that’s really busy, just breathe through the tension so you’re not carrying it around. Then it’ll weaken. So whatever the anger is, or whatever the lust, or the fear, or whatever, the anxiety about being around other people, then you find that you don’t have to fall into that particular emotion. And if going through the whole day seems like too big a prospect, this is where you do the reverse of a John Fung’s example. He talks about having a day that’s timeless, where every time, whether it’s time to eat, time to work, time to whatever, it’s always time to meditate. Well, keep that as time to meditate, but realize that the skill that’s needed to stay with your center when you’re talking to other people is different from the skill you need to stay with your center while you’re working. You’re working on the computer, or you’re working in the orchard. So if you find yourself getting lost in the middle of the day, try to sit down and figure out what are the tasks you have to do, and which are the ones where you tend to lose your focus most easily. And focus on that particular task, saying that while you’re doing that task, you’re going to try to be extra careful to maintain your center. When you give this practice of going through the day some focus like this, you can begin to break the problems down to see exactly what it is that keeps you from staying with your center. Because ideally, the fact that you’re with your center allows you to catch yourself, to see what your defilements are, where are the things that pull you off. And if you have the time, you can do the Buddha’s analysis. In other words, where is the origination? What’s causing the mind to think in those terms? How long does it last? When does it stop? When does it start up again? And when it starts up again, what was the allure? Why did you go for it? Sometimes you’re actually more likely to gain insights into the mind when you’re dealing with the mind at the same time you’re doing something else, because you’re going back and forth between the task you’re focused on outside and the task you’re focused on inside. And sometimes you slip back inside, just as you catch the mind doing something that you hadn’t seen before. And Jon Sawat talks about how most of his important insights in his meditation came while he was doing walking meditation. When he was sitting down, the mind was more centered, more stable. Because when he was doing walking meditation, he had to focus between the center inside and his surroundings. And this would go back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes he’d come back to the center inside and catch it in the midst of doing something he hadn’t noticed. So this is an important skill, and it’s an important task that you set for yourself, going through the day, keeping your center, and gaining a sense of what’s going on, what the individual problems are. Because that gives some focus to your questioning. Why is it that the mind goes for that particular defilement? And sometimes you’ll find it comes in waves, like with sensual desire. There’ll be periods when the mind seems all too inclined to wander off in that direction. And then it’ll stop for a while. It won’t seem interested at all. Then it starts up again. You want to notice that. What’s going on? Is it because you’re physically tired, mentally tired? Because oftentimes we go for sensuality because we’re tired. We want a quick fix. We don’t have to deal with all the steps that go to getting a sense of rapture and refreshment from the breath. This is when you have to talk to yourself, realizing that you don’t want to develop that kind of bad habit. Do what you can to pull yourself out of it. Then get back to the breath. There’s a lot to learn as you go through the day, trying to maintain the center. But again, if you think about it as a whole day process, it gets a little bit too vague, too shapeless. So take note. What are your tasks throughout the day? And as you’re trying to stay centered with each of the tasks, what are the special problems that particular task holds for you? Focus on clearing up those problems one by one by one. And you’ll find that your center begins to connect and you can carry on. You carry it through from one task to the next to the next. And it’s this way that your practice develops momentum. When the time comes to sit down and meditate again, you’re right here. You’re not wandering off like a dog on a long leash. Because you give yourself a long leash like that, then when the time comes to meditate, you find, like a dog, you’ve wrapped the leash around trees, around lampposts, around benches, around people’s legs. And you have to very carefully unwind, unwind, unwind the leash. But if it’s on a short leash, you’re right here. Sit down and get to work. And just remember, you want to make this your priority, having this foundation. And don’t think of it as just one more task for the day. We go through the day juggling lots of different things. Don’t think of it as one more thing that you have to juggle. It’s the place where you can stand. If you’ve got a good, solid place to stand, then it’s a lot easier to juggle things. If you’re standing on a nice flow and having to jump from one to the next to the next. Everything’s going to fall into the river. You’re going to fall into the river. You’ve got the breath as your island. You’ve got something firm to depend on. So even though the river goes past, you’re standing right here. And you see clearly what’s going past. And anything that might snag you otherwise, you can avoid the snag.

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