The Solution Starts Inside

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One of Jon Furing’s students came to complain to him one time. She said she’d been meditating with him for two years, and he was still teaching her concentration. She wanted to know when she was going to move on to the insight. He told her that it was like building a building. You have to start with a good solid foundation, and as long as the foundation isn’t yet solid, you don’t start building. Start building one or two stories and they come crashing down. Once the foundation is solid, though, you can add as many stories as you like and it won’t come down. So work on your foundation. Keep it solid. If it’s not solid, make it solid. If it is solid already, make sure you maintain it. Don’t get complacent. This concentration on its own does deteriorate. And it’s not the case that you’re doing just concentration. There has to be some discernment as you get the mind to settle down. Because we’re dealing with problems all the time. And that’s what discernment basically is, is learning how to deal skillfully with problems. Look at the Four Noble Truths. The big problem right there is suffering. And the Buddha tackles it as a problem, something that can be solved. That’s something just to accept. He didn’t simply say, “There is suffering, and leave it at that.” He said, “Suffering is in clinging to the five aggregates.” That gives you a handle on it for the purpose of solving it. And it’s in trying to solve it that your discernment develops. It’s largely a matter of developing your sensitivity, ultimately, to the movements of your mind. And you need to have that in order to get the mind to settle down. There are times when the movements of the mind are too subtle. While working on them directly, you just get more and more entangled in them. So you have to step back. This is why we have the breath. It’s something close to the mind but not in the mind. Be with the sensation of the breath coming in and going out, and content yourself with being there. That means that any other movements that would go away from the breath right now—your sense of the body here in the present moment—are not to be followed. Try to cut them off. If you can’t cut them off, they keep chattering away in the mind. Let them have their space, but you have your space, the body right here. No matter how much the mind may want to go out to this, that, the other thing, you keep it right here. Because this foundation is not just a foundation. One of the common analogies the Buddha gives for concentration is food. It’s food for your right effort, food for your right mindfulness. The extended analogy the Buddha gives is that the practice is like having a fortress at the edge of a frontier. You know there are enemies outside. So your mindfulness has to be a good gatekeeper to let in only those who are friends, known friends, and to keep everybody else out. In the same way, you have to let in only things that you know will have a good impact on the mind. And as for anything else, just let it go. That also means—and this is where the analogy breaks down—things coming out of the mind. You want to make sure that bad things don’t come out or you don’t act on bad intentions. You have to be selective. Mindfulness is not just an overarching acceptance of everything. It’s a faculty of the memory, and you’re remembering what’s skillful and what’s not. Then your knowledge of what’s skillful and what’s not is going to have to develop with the practice. So your mindfulness gets more and more informed and has a better chance of weeding out all the enemy forces that are going to come in. That’s her right effort. The Buddha says those are like the soldiers that defend the fortress. They have to be strong. They have to develop what’s skillful inside and let go of what’s unskillful. Both the gatekeeper and the soldiers need food, and that’s what the concentration is. Food for the mind. Food for the heart. This is why it’s so important that you learn how to have a sense of well-being with the breath. So explore what kind of breathing feels good. It’s going to change from day to day. This is one way of keeping your practice alert to see what’s needed today. Sometimes you have specific illnesses in the body—pains here, pains there. What way of focusing on the breath will help, if not alleviate the pains, at least give you some place where you can stand apart from them. The same with the voices that you can’t get out of the mind. Stay with just the physical sensation of the breath and think of the voices as just evaporating away. They say things and then it evaporates away. You don’t let yourself resonate with them. The Buddha said that the unenlightened mind is like a gong. Everything that gets said to it, it reflects and it reverberates. You want to make your mind like a broken gong. Somebody hits it and there’s no sound. It just goes clunk and that’s it. Otherwise, you just remind yourself that the sound makes contact with the air. That’s it. That’s it. It’s making contact. And as soon as the contact goes, that should be the end of the problem. If there’s any reverberation, it’s inside. It’s you now. You’re stabbing yourself with that sound. So at that point, you can’t blame the other person. You were the one who picked up the noise, picked up the unpleasant words, and made them more than just the contact. Why did you do that? Because you were hungry. So get back to the concentration as much as you can. This doesn’t mean that you don’t deal with difficult situations. It’s simply that you have a sense of which ones are worth dealing with and when the right time is to deal with them. And you’re going to see that better if you have a sense of well-being inside that you can feed on. So the concentration is there to feed your right effort, to encourage you in developing skillful qualities and just letting go of whatever is unskillful. And you can see what’s going on in the mind. That is your way of doing things. It’s simply that these are skillful thoughts and these are unskillful thoughts. Remember how the Buddha got on the path by dividing his thoughts into two sorts. And it wasn’t only when he was sitting with his eyes closed. It was when he was out and dealing with the world. He depersonalized the issue. Otherwise, he’d be thinking, “These are the thoughts I like, and these are the thoughts I think, and this is my way of thinking.” He took the “me” out of it, the “my” out of it. And just notice that this is a thought that comes from this kind of mental state. And if it comes from an unskillful mental state, don’t follow it. He looked at thinking as a process, cause and effect. He looked at the causes, looked at the effects, and they’re made up in his mind that no matter how much he liked a particular way of thinking, if it’s coming from a bad cause or having a bad effect, he had to let it go. Other kinds of thinking which may have come hard to him, may not have been his usual way of thinking, but he didn’t have to encourage those. But even then, he said, with skillful thinking, engage in skillful thoughts for a whole day and a night, the mind’s going to get tired. So this is why you have to rest again. Feed the mind again. So keep coming back to this, getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being inside. This is going to be your strength. This is your food. This is your rest. This is your foundation. Make it strong. Remember, concentration is the heart of the path. All the other factors, the Buddha said, are its requisites or its supports. But for the path to come together, it has to come together here, in a mind that’s centered, still, solid, well-fed. That turns the discernment from just words you’ve read about into a sensitivity in the mind that sees very clearly that this kind of movement in the mind is going to cause suffering. You’d better stop. And here’s how you stop. The more still you are, the more sensitive you can be. That’s the real discernment. So look after the causes for that kind of discernment, and it’ll be able to do its work for you. It can solve the problem, which is all the suffering and stress that the mind creates for itself, even though it doesn’t want to. And it’ll enable you to see why. And now you really don’t have to do that. And whether you think in constancy, stress, and not-self, or don’t think in those terms, when you see that you’re causing trouble for yourself and you don’t have to, as Ajahn Mahaprabhu says, nobody else has to tell you. You just let go.

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