Practice Without Gaps

April 2, 2023

When you meditate, you’re setting up an intention. The intention is to stay with the breath, and then you want to maintain that intention. The original intention is not so hard, but maintaining it, that’s where you run into difficulties, because the mind does have this tendency to jump around, and then it’ll come back, and then somehow it jumps again without you even realizing that it’s jumped. So you have to train yourself to be more alert to what’s going on in the mind, and try to make your alertness and mindfulness continuous. It’s then that they have a chance to grow. And these are qualities we have already. It’s just that they’re sporadic, and they tend not to be really consistent or continuous, which is why we don’t see that they have much power. It’s when you make them continuous that they develop power. So do your best to stay with the breath. One way of ensuring that is to make the breath something interesting to focus on. So you can recall that the way you breathe is going to have an impact on your body and on your mind. So you want to adjust the way you breathe. See what kind of impact it has. Learn from your experience as to what works and what doesn’t work. And you begin to notice that when the breath gets more comfortable and easeful, you can think of that sense of comfort and ease spreading around the body. That makes it even more interesting to stay here. And as the concentration gets more continuous, it really does have an impact on the mind, strengthens the mind. That concentration is basically mindfulness practice that becomes continuous. You remember with mindfulness practice you set up one frame of reference, in this case it would be the body in and of itself. The way you breathe right now is one example. And you try to put aside all greed and distress with reference to the world. That means any thoughts about the world, what you like about it, what you don’t like about it, just put those aside. Maintain your original frame of reference. And as it gets more and more solid, that’s when the mindfulness practice turns into concentration. And as I said, mindfulness, concentration, these are things we already have. So we have to learn how to make them continuous so that they actually begin to make a difference. This is a principle that you find throughout the Buddhist teachings. You start with the precepts. There’s a precept against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. And if we say the someone doesn’t observe the precepts, that doesn’t mean they’re killing all the time or stealing all the time or having illicit sex all the time. In fact, as the Buddha himself noted, even with people who misbehave a lot, it’s not the case that the times they’re breaking the precepts are more than the times that they’re not breaking the precepts. It’s simply the fact that there are these big gaping holes in their precepts. That’s the problem. Because there’s a lack of continuity. The precepts don’t have much of a power. As the Buddha said, it’s when you make up your mind that you’re going to observe the precepts in all cases and you actually do follow through, you’re giving universal safety to the whole world. In other words, there’s nothing they have to fear from you. And when you give universal safety, then you get a share in that safety yourself. At the same time, as you keep reminding yourself, you’ve got to observe the precepts, you’re strengthening your mindfulness. And in order to make sure that you are observing the precepts, you have to be alert to what you’re doing and saying and what your intentions are. Because as you know, if you break a precept unintentionally, it doesn’t count as really breaking the precept. So you have to be very careful about your intentions and make sure they always are skillful. Any unskillful intentions come up in the mind, you just say no. You don’t go with them. That way, as your virtue becomes more continuous, then it becomes a good foundation for your concentration. You get used to not making exceptions for your likes and dislikes. This is one of the problems of the world right now. There are people who say they honor the precepts and they honor the principle that you shouldn’t be harmful. But then they say except for these cases, and then the list of exceptions gets longer and longer and longer, until the precept has no meaning. It’s basically, I’ll observe it when I feel like it and not when I don’t feel like it. In that case, the precept hasn’t been given the honor it deserves. Because remember, the Buddha said we have to respect the triple training, and that means respecting the precepts. We respect our likes and our dislikes more. There’s no training there except for training in being devious with yourself. Training in not being consistent, not being true to yourself. What this means, of course, is that you observe the precepts. It’s not just a matter of mindfulness and alertness and ardency. It’s also a matter of discernment. Because there will come times when you suspect that if you observe the precepts, some kind of harm will happen. Now in some cases, the Buddha says, remember that the things that might be harmed in terms of your wealth, your health, even your relatives, those are less important than the precept. But there will come times, say, when you know some information and somebody wants that information and you know they’re going to abuse it, you have to learn some way not to give the information, but at the same time not to lie, not to misrepresent the truth. That’s going to require discernment on how to change the subject. How to avoid answering the question. And learning that kind of discernment will be useful when you start dealing with your own defilements as you try to get the mind into concentration. So we don’t wait until our precepts are perfect before we practice concentration, but the more consistent we can make our precepts, the easier it will be to get the mind in a good consistent concentration. The kind of concentration that will make a difference in the mind. When Ajahn Sawad was teaching back in Massachusetts, the last day of the retreat, they asked a question about taking meditation practice into daily life. And so he talked about the precepts. Some of the people got upset. They thought his implication was that laypeople couldn’t practice in daily life, so they shouldn’t even try. They should just content themselves with the precepts. But as he later explained, he said no, an important part of mindfulness practice and concentration practice is creating a good foundation in the way you live your life. And as you get practice in not making exceptions, where this instance when the precepts might be awkward, or this instance where observing the precepts might cause you to suffer some financial loss, or loss of your health, when you get used to not making those exceptions, then when the time comes to meditate, you’ll get used to not making obsessions when the mind says, “Well, I’ve got a whole hour to meditate here. Let me take five minutes to think about X or think about Y.” The mind will have developed a habit to stay true to its intention. And the factors of the path will have a chance to build up momentum as they become more and more continuous. But the gaps in your precepts, the gaps in your concentration, get smaller and smaller. And finally, the precepts do become a normalcy for your behavior. And concentration becomes a normalcy for your mind. The Pali word for precept, sila, can also mean normalcy. That’s what you want. A mind that’s consistently normal, not just normal from time to time. Concentration that’s normal consistently and not just from time to time. So develop this habit of being true to the practice and giving the practice respect over and above your likes and dislikes. Because your likes and dislikes are pretty fickle. They can change from moment to moment. But the principles of the practice don’t change. What they were in the time of the Buddha, they are now. And those are the things you can depend on. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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