Steadiness

June 6, 2023

As you meditate, you find yourself playing three roles. There’s the doer, who does the meditation, focuses on the breath, talks about how comfortable the breath is or how comfortable it’s not, recommends changes, and then tries to act on those changes. Then there’s the experiencer, the one, the part of you that is experiencing either pleasure, pain, ease, lack of ease, as you focus. And then there’s the commentator, watching things, observing, and then trying to decide whether things are going well or not. And that commentator requires a lot of training. Because it can get you very discouraged, things are not going well, and it starts telling you that you’re hopeless as a meditator, which, of course, is no help at all. You have to tell the commentator, “I’m going to be listening only to a positive criticism.” Positive in the sense of being helpful, hopeful. Criticism in the sense of being willing to admit when things are not going well. Being open to learning. There are so many people whose commentator is pretty toxic. We’re taught, I don’t know by how many places, to try to be nonjudgmental, which is true. You shouldn’t be judgmental. But you have to be judicious as to what’s skillful and what’s not. And given that we’re dealing with two kinds of things here, we’re dealing with the results of past karma, and we’re dealing with our own actual karma right now, you have to start parsing out the difference between the two. Because sometimes things come up through the force of past karma, and they’re really strong. And no matter how much you try to stop them with your present intentions, they just won’t be stopped. For example, the dam that’s burst. The water just flows. The dam can no longer hold it in. But you’re standing on the side of the river, and you have the choice whether you’re going to jump in that river or not. And if you’re wise, you say, “No, I’m going to hold back.” This is why we have the breath as a place where you can stand on the side of the river and not get swept away. That’s when the observer simply observes. He says, “Okay, there’s nothing much we can do about this, but at least we can hold on and not get swept away by the currents.” Because there’s a part of the mind that can just watch. In terms of the aggregates, it’s your consciousness. Perception is more active. Consciousness is more passive. Perception gives meaning to things. Consciousness simply registers what’s happening. It’s doing it again and again and again. Bad things come in, and it registers bad things. Good things come in, and it registers good things. Just whether you get upset or excited by the good or bad things, that’s more sankara, fabrication. Of course, perception plays a role in that, too. The perception that says, “I can’t stand this,” is one. The perception that says, “Well, you just have to give in,” is another one. Deciding whether the voices in that current that are flowing through are saying things that are reasonable or not, that’s another perception. It’s more active. For the times when you have to be simply receiving that this is what’s happening, and you hold on to one fabrication and one perception, which is the intention to stay with the breath, and the perception that the breath is there all the time. Remind yourself that no matter what the emotions coming through may be, they’re not destroying your breath, and they don’t have to distort the breath. One of the important lessons of the meditation is that as you watch the breath, you learn that you don’t just put up with whatever the breath is doing. You have a role in shaping it. So you can try to breathe as calmly as you can. That’s what you hold on to. So try to get in touch with that function of the mind that simply registers things as being present. The Thai jhans have lots of different names for that. Some of them call it the puru, which literally means “the one who knows,” or “what knows,” or “awareness itself.” There’s one a jhan who calls it. It’s basically singleness of mind, when you’re able to keep your awareness on an even keel regardless of what comes and what goes, because you want to have that evenness so you can see what actually is happening. In the beginning, it’s simply watching it for the sake of endurance and restraint. You’re mindful not to go with whatever the emotion is. You hold yourself back. It may be a painful emotion, but you say, “Well, there’s parts of the mind that can put up with the pain. There are parts that can’t put up with the pain.” Those are your perceptions and your fabrications. In other words, they’re activities. We tend to identify with them, saying, “There’s a spot in the mind that’s being wounded by these things.” But actually it’s an activity of the mind that says, “I can’t stand this. I don’t like this. Whatever.” When you can start seeing these things as activities and not identify with the “you” in there that’s on the receiving end of whatever’s painful or not, but if you have to identify with anything, identify with the part that’s able just to be aware of things and leave it at that, just aware it’s there. Then you find you can endure a lot of things you couldn’t otherwise. But simple endurance is not enough. As Ajahn Chah once said, “If endurance were enough for awakening, chickens would have awakened a long time ago.” They can sit on their eggs for hours and hours, but they have no discernment. So we want to be able to use our endurance as a basis for discernment, realizing that when an emotion comes through the mind, there’s going to be a whole series of hooks, kind of like Velcro. And often they come very fast, so fast that you can hardly see the individual ones. But if you can stay with a sense of just being aware and posing a question to the mind, “What are the hooks that would pull me into this current?” You’ll begin to see them. The little agreements between the mind and your perceptions and your thought fabrications, saying, “Okay, that’s important. I can go with that.” You want to see that and then question it. Why? Endurance is not a quality to develop simply for its own sake, but you develop it so you can have a basis for seeing things clearly. This becomes part of your concentration. This still is steadiness, because it’s steadiness that keeps you going. Not only when there are emotions like this, but anything that comes up in the meditation at all that would pull you off track. You have to be steady in the face of these things. And you learn how to make the doer of the meditation steady as well. Sometimes women are really enthusiastic about the practice, other times women are not so enthusiastic. And if the practice has to depend on your enthusiasm, it’s not going to last. Because enthusiasm is inconstant. You get fired up for a while, and then the fire goes out. Then you have to light some more kindling and get it going again. But in the meantime, you have to stick with the practice regardless. On the days when you want to do it, you do it. On the days when you don’t want to do it, you do it. And you learn how to talk to yourself, to encourage yourself. I know someone who’s been taking swimming lessons with an Olympic swimmer. And she noticed that the Olympic swimmer could swim every day, every day, every day. And she answered, “Don’t you have times when you don’t want to?” And her teacher said, “Yeah, there are times when you don’t want to.” “I’ll go ahead and do it anyhow, and I’ll tell myself those are my championship days.” In other words, those are the days that are going to make a difference between whether you win a championship or not. Schiller, the famous German poet, made a distinction between things that are done with grace and things that are done with dignity. Grace, he said, is when you know the right thing to do and you find that you want to do it, it’s easy to do it. It feels very natural. Dignity is when you know the right thing to do but you don’t want to do it. It’s hard, but you’re able to talk yourself into doing it. So develop that skill. Because the ability to stay with this knower inside, it’s not the awakened part of the mind, it’s simply consciousness. But as you find yourself slipping away from that into other thought-factors, fabrications, and other perceptions, you have to develop thought-fabrications and perceptions that would steer you back, that would encourage you to say, “I can stick with this. I’m not going to identify with the voices that make it hard.” In that way, the practice becomes more steady. So you want to develop this quality of steadiness in your practice, whatever comes up. Steadiness in the observer, steadiness in the doer, and steadiness in the receiver. The receiver is able to put up with things when they’re not perfect. For the purpose of developing more and more skill, you want these three different roles in the mind to work together to help one another along. That’s how the practice progresses, bit by bit by bit. As John Fung used to say, “This is something that we do that’s small, but we do it continually.” Now, in Thai, that’s a pun. The word for “small” in Thai is nit. The word for “continually” is nit. It’s spelled differently, but pronounced the same way. So it’s a small thing, just being with this awareness, trying to notice what’s going on. But you do it steadily. That’s how small things become large. So your concentration may start out small, but as you work on it steadily, it grows into something large and solid, something you can depend on. you

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230606_Steadiness.mp3>