

Questioning the Hindrances

May 27, 2007

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha says that you need both tranquility and insight in order to get the mind into right concentration. The Pali terms are: for tranquility, *samatha* and insight, *vipassana*. You need them both for there to be right concentration.

This goes against the idea you sometimes hear that the Buddha taught two very distinct kinds of meditation. One is tranquility meditation, and the other is vipassana meditation. Tranquility is when you sit very still and don't do anything at all; vipassana is where you gain your understanding. Vipassana does all the work. Tranquility is a lazy man's or lazy woman's out and a waste of time—the scenic route as opposed to the direct route.

But that's not how the Buddha taught it. When he told the monks to go and meditate, he said, "Go do jhana." Get the mind absorbed. And, as he said, for the mind to get into a state of absorption, you need to learn how to still the mind—to let it settle down to enjoy the stillness—but at the same time, you need to learn how to question the way the mind acts, the way it fabricates things. You need to gain insight into these things.

If you don't have insight, you can't have any real measure of control over the mind to bring the mind into the right balance of right concentration so that it's not just "stump concentration," as they call it in the forest tradition. That's where you sit like a stump with no powers of observation, no understanding at all. At the same time, with right concentration you don't go wandering off into the thoughts, analysis, and world perceptions where insight practice—without any good, solid concentration foundation—can lead you.

So you need the two qualities together, stillness and insight. They work together. The stillness is what enables you to see. Now, you can wallow in the stillness, get carried away by the stillness, and refuse to see. That's one extreme. But without genuine stillness, your ideas of what you've tried to analyze about the mind in action end up being just more perceptions, labels, ideas that you picked up from the books or from teachers. You basically figure things out. But because the mind isn't still, you're not really observing it as carefully as you could.

There are a lot of unexpected insights to be gained, after all. If it were just a matter of trying to see things the way they are in the books, there would always the question: Are you simply programming the mind, forcing it into a mold?

When the Buddha taught insight, he didn't teach a technique. He just taught a series of questions. "How do you look at the fabrications of the mind?" That's a question he posed, and then you have to learn how to look at your fabrications yourself. "How do you regard fabrications? How do you understand them?" You pose questions in the mind, and it's in the posing of the question that you start gaining insight. You approach insight as an issue not of trying to force the mind into a mold, into a prescribed set of understandings, but as a series of continual questions. What is the mind doing? What does it fabricate; what does it create? How are its fabrications skillful? How are they not? When you take that questioning attitude and combine it with the stillness, that's when the mind really reaches breakthroughs in understanding, catches itself in action as it creates suffering.

That's one of the natures of the mind, that it creates a lot of its experience. We don't just experience raw data thrown at us; we process them. And it's in the processing that we make a lot of changes, many of which we're not even aware of because the processing is so subconscious. One of the purposes of the meditation is to bring all of this up into the light of consciousness, which requires both stillness and a questioning attitude. So you can't say beforehand, "I only need x amount of concentration in order to gain awakening." For each person, it's more a matter of what your habits are, what your problems are, where your mind tends to create unnecessary issues—and learning to see through that.

As one of the suttas says, with some people, the practice is slow and comfortable; with others, it's fast and comfortable. With some, it's slow and difficult; and with others, it's fast and difficult. Of course, if we had our choice, we'd all take the fast, easy, and comfortable way. But it's not something we can choose. We've got our own individual issues. For some of us, the meditation's going to be difficult; it's going to take a long time. Or it may be pleasant, but still take a long time. There are some people in whom the mind just gets to the first stage of right concentration, the first jhana, and they immediately gain the insight they need for awakening. Those are people whose powers of insight, their powers of watching themselves, are really sharp; they don't need that much stillness. But for other people, it takes a lot of stillness. Again, you can't decide beforehand whether you have time for a lot of stillness. If it's what you need, you've got to do it.

So you try to combine these qualities of tranquility and insight in the process of getting the mind to settle down. After all, it's important for the mind to settle down. You've got to get past what are called the hindrances. These are five obstacles to getting the mind really in good, solid concentration. If you don't

understand how the mind gets involved in these things, you're not going to be able to get past them. In the very beginning, just getting the mind to settle down requires a certain amount of insight into what's getting in the way.

The first hindrance is sensual desire; the second is ill will; the third is sloth and torpor; the fourth is restlessness and anxiety; and the fifth is uncertainty. The first is more related to passion. The second, ill will, is more related to aversion. The last three are more related to delusion one way or another. The only way you're going to get past these things is to understand them, because in each case we tend to fall in with a hindrance. We believe it. We get fooled by it. That's why we get ensnared in it.

You start thinking about things you like—sights, sounds, tastes, tactile sensations, aromas—and part of your mind says, “Yeah, these things really are attractive. They really are desirable.” And because you believe in the hindrance, it takes over. The same with ill will: When someone has been really nasty, it's easy to say, “This person really deserves to suffer. I'd really like to see him squirm.” Again, you've fallen; you *believed* in what the hindrance had to say. Sloth and torpor come along. You say, “Yeah, I really am tired. I really do need some sleep.” Restlessness and anxiety: “Oh, these things really have to be worried about. These things, you've got to prepare for; there really could be a big problem.” With uncertainty, you just can't see for sure. “This path that we're following here: Does it really do any good at all to be sitting here with our eyes closed, watching the breath?” You start wondering.

As long as you believe in these things, it's very difficult to get past them. That's why you have to learn how to question them. This is where the insight comes in. The Buddha has long suttas devoted, for instance, to the problem of sensual desire. The fact that we desire these things: What do we have to do in order to get what we want? Well, we have to work. Sometimes we get into arguments, and we get into wars. If you want to drive around, you need all the oil you can get. Well, oil is not buried under our sand; it's buried under somebody else's sand. So there are wars. If you want somebody, and somebody else wants that person, there are going to be fights. Or you want the money to buy the things you want? Well, you've got to work hard. You've got to sit in miserable jobs that, if they didn't pay you, you would never touch.

These are some of the drawbacks of sensuality. So every time you get the mind tied up into sensual thoughts, just remind yourself: If you wanted to actually gain that object or that person, what would you have to do? And try to think of all the implications, not just the nice ones, because we tend to dress things up, focusing only on the good things and forgetting the bad things. You've got to keep

reminding yourself: These are the implications. You want a body that has all these sensual pleasures? Well, you've got to feed it; you've got to clothe it; you've got to find shelter; you've got to take care of all its illnesses. Learn to look at the drawbacks of sensual desire so that the next time it comes up, you don't so easily fall for it. Always learn to question these things.

The same with ill will: Maybe that person you have ill will for really is a horrible person, but what about you? Is it good for you to be sitting here, raging and fuming? The Buddha has you think about the fact that the more you think about other people's bad qualities, the more you start seeing the whole human race as being discouraging, disappointing. Then you, yourself: What happens to your own goodness? There's a great cartoon in *The New Yorker*. These two dogs, all dressed up—female dogs with long eyelashes—are sitting at a bar. And one of them is saying to the other, "They're all sons of bitches." Okay, when everybody else is a son of a bitch, you start turning into a bitch or a son of a bitch.

The image the Buddha gives is of someone trembling from thirst and heat, walking through the desert and finding a cow print with a little bit of water in it. He needs the water in the cow print, and he has to be very careful. He can't scoop it up in his hands because he'll muddy it, so he has to get down on all fours and slurp it up. The Buddha says to regard the goodness of bad people in the same way. You look for their goodness. Go to extreme lengths to look for their goodness. You need to see their goodness because you need the water of their goodness to water your own goodness, to keep it alive.

So learn how to question your ill will.

And the same with sloth and torpor: The Buddha has a whole series of exercises by which, when you find yourself sitting here, sleeping and nodding off, you question it: Does the body really need rest, or is it simply a matter of boredom? Part of your mind is looking for something else; it doesn't like being here, meditating with the breath. After all, what's that saying? If it's not boring, it's not Buddhism. Well, that's not really the case.

There are actually lots of interesting things going on right now. You've got this whole body sitting here with all of its little parts. You've got the breath energy working in different ways in the body. There's a lot to explore. Make a really detailed catalogue of all the little parts of the body and how the breath energy is working in each. Or you can experiment on parts of the body you haven't focused on before: the breath in your knees, say, or the breath in the base of your spine; the breath at your elbows; the breath in between your fingers; the breath outside your body. There's a lot to explore in the present moment, so give the mind work to do to see if you can stir it up and get some energy going.

Then there are the canonical techniques: If you've memorized any chants, just think them to yourself. Get up and walk around. If you find yourself still sleepy when you get up and walk around, okay, it's time: You really do need to get some rest. But don't just give in to the hindrance when it comes. Learn to question it.

It's the same with worry and anxiety, or restlessness. These things that you're worried about: If they really happened, what would be the best way to prepare for them? Not by spending the whole night worrying and wearing yourself out! You're going to need mindfulness; you're going to need alertness. You're going to need an inner sense of strength that you can draw on, and this is what the meditation is for. It strengthens these good qualities that you can use in any situation if you're willing to use them. So the best way to prepare for future contingencies is to strengthen the mind as much as you can. Gain practice in being as mindful as possible, as alert as possible, open to new ways of thinking. And also, try to get that perspective on future dangers.

There's that great passage where the monk is going to a dangerous part of India. He takes leave of the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "You know, the people there are reputed to be pretty savage. What if they curse you?" And the monk says, "Well, I'd think these people are very good in that they're not hitting me." "What if they hit you?" "I'll think they're very good in that they're not throwing stones at me." "What if they throw stones at you?" "I'll think they're very good; they're not stabbing me." "What if they stab you?" "I'll think these people are very good and civilized; they're not killing me." "What if they kill you?" "At least my death wouldn't have been a suicide." Learn how to think in those ways, and you put the dangers and worries of life into a much better perspective.

Then finally, there's uncertainty. We start questioning: "Well, who really knows about this path? Does this really work or not? Maybe nobody knows. Maybe it's all just a charade, this practice of sitting here like a fool, looking at your breath day in and day out." Well, if you look at it like a fool, it's going to look foolish. Here you've got the chance of looking at your mind, observing it. The Buddha said the way to overcome uncertainty is to check and see what the mind is doing that's skillful and what's unskillful. In other words, learn how to look at cause and effect as they actually show themselves in your life, in your actions.

You'll notice that the skillful actions do require more mindfulness, more alertness, and here's a good way of testing it. Can you sit with your breath mindfully for a whole hour and not forget it? Can you be alert to the movements of the mind that are causing you to suffer? What better way would there be of seeing these things than sitting right here with nothing else to distract you, and then *really* be observant? This is what makes all the difference in the world.

There are all those meditation techniques out there, but no technique can guarantee you awakening simply following the rules, following the instructions. There's got to be that added quality: the ability to learn how to question. Take the technique, master it, and then use it as an opportunity to observe your mind in action to see where it's creating suffering, where it's not. As Ajaan Lee once said, monks can sit and meditate until they die buried in heaps of yellow robes and still not reach nibbana. Lay people can sit and meditate until their backs are all bent over and still not reach nibbana—if they're not observant. You take the technique, develop it, and you use it as an opportunity to catch the mind in action to see where it's causing stress, and also to catch it in action when it's not causing stress. And you see there really is a difference in your ability to meditate. Developing these skills is what enabled you to see.

So what we're doing here requires both tranquility to get everything calmed down enough so you can actually watch for a while, and the questioning of insight that leads to true discernment, that's not willing to take everything for granted, that's willing to look into all the "of-courses" in the mind. "Of course, the mind has to worry! Of course, it has to be bound up in sensual desire! How else could people live?" Well, maybe it's not "of course." Learn to question these things like Isaac Newton. It was the nature of things to fall. Well, why do they fall? He asked that question. Other people thought it was a stupid question because after all, it's just their nature to fall. Well, why? And it's because he asked the question that he learned things.

It's the same with the meditation. You work with the technique, but you've got to learn how to question the mind as it's mastering the technique. That's where it really starts making a difference.