

Circumspection

May 26, 2007

One of the most striking things about the Buddha's teachings is how little he deals in abstractions, and how much he focuses on particulars, techniques, and strategies. Instead of talking about the wonders of oneness, emptiness, or nibbana, he tells you how to get to nibbana, to true happiness. He focuses on very particular things.

His thinking was strategic. He saw that you can't attack the problem of suffering straight on. You attack it through its causes: That's strategic thinking. Sometimes even his way of attacking the causes is a little indirect. The cause, he says, is craving. So what does he have you do? He doesn't have you look at craving right off the bat. He has you look at your breath, or at the body, in one way or another. In the course of staying focused here, you begin to see a lot of things besides just the body or the breath. In other words, we focus on the breath not because we're trying to *get* the breath or to turn into expert breathers. The breath is simply a means to what we really want.

So the Buddha has a strategic purpose in getting you to focus on the particulars. Be very observant of the little things, because little things make a big difference. Right now, apply this principle to how you're focusing on the breath. Look for the little things: How long can you stay with the breath? How does the mind allow itself to wander off from the breath? Try to catch it in the act of wandering off.

And do what you can to make the breath more interesting, because that helps you fend off the tendency to get distracted, which is one of *the* big problems you have to deal with. It goes deep. It happens often while you're trying to stay with any topic of concentration. Things are going well and then a few minutes later you realize you're totally somewhere else. Something happened. There was a blanking out. That blanking out right there: That's the big problem. The Buddha calls it ignorance. This element of not knowing: How does it happen? What are the details of how it happens? How could it be that you're thoroughly aware of the breath one moment and then, a moment later, be all blanked out?

This may seem like a small thing, but it relates to one of the big issues in understanding the causes of suffering: the process of becoming and its relation to ignorance. We create these little worlds in the mind. But in order to create them, there has to be an element of blanking out, where one part of the mind lies to another part of the mind, closing things off for a second.

It's like when you go to a play, a traditional play, where between the scenes they lower the curtain. The curtain rises and you're in a totally different place. Before you were in a drawing room, and now you're out on top of a mountain. They lower the curtain because they have to change the scenery and they don't want you to see the changing of the scenery, because that destroys the illusion of the new scene. You're presented with a totally new scene, out of nowhere, out of nothing, which seems more believable because you didn't see how it was constructed bit by bit. It's more believable because the curtain was down for a while.

The same holds true with the mind. The curtain goes down, and there's a certain willingness for the curtain go down. This is where the mind plays tricks on itself. This trickiness of the mind is what we have to learn how to understand if we're going to get anywhere in the meditation. Why is it that even though we know better, we do things that we know are going cause us harm? There's that moment of ignorance when we allow ourselves to forget. So as we practice, we want to catch the mind in action—in this allowing, this willing, of ignorance.

And again, as with so many other things in the Buddha's range of techniques, he advises an indirect approach. The first thing is to try to develop a particular meditative skill, with whatever the technique you've chosen. If you're going to stay with the breath, be really skillful about staying with the breath. Try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing: how it feels when you breathe in; how it feels when you breathe out; what ways of breathing feel better than others; what ways of focusing your mind allow you to stay longer with the breath. If you stay focused on one spot, it's very easy for the mind to lose its focus when the breath gets very subtle. You start drifting off. This is basically how we go to sleep. It's an old habit: We allow things to let go, let go, let go, we relax, and then we're gone into a dream world. That's the process of becoming in action, the process of birth in action, as we wander off into the dream.

Because the mind is so used to falling asleep when it's relaxed, you have to be extra vigilant as the mind gets comfortable with the breath, as the breath feels good in the spot where you're focused. You have to spread your awareness from that one spot so that it becomes an enlarged, full-body awareness. One way of doing this is to go through the body section by section first. Another is to start out by trying to maintain two spots at the same time—say, one up in the head, and the other down at the base of the spine. The activity of being focused on two spots at once helps keep you awake. It keeps the mind transfixed.

It's as if the mind has two hands: If you focus on one on just spot with one hand, the other hand is free to grab on to other things. But if you give yourself two

spots to hold on to, both hands are full. Then think of a line connecting the top of the head and the base of the spine. Be aware of how that feels, how the breath energy feels all along that line. Then, from that line, expand your awareness out to fill the whole body and then do what you can to maintain this full body awareness. Every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out, think, “whole body, whole body,” so that you don’t forget.

This way, you develop your mindfulness, you develop your alertness, and you develop another quality as well: circumspection, your ability to see all around. This all-around seeing is what allows you to see the things you’re really here to see—because, after all, the mind’s focusing on one thing to the exclusion of other things is what plays a big part in ignorance. That’s how the mind fools itself: You get your attention focused on one thing, and other things shift in your blind spot. Then when you turn around, you see that something’s changed. You find yourself in a whole different place.

So we focus on the breath not only to see the breath but also to see all around it, to see what the mind is doing in relation to the breath. This quality of circumspection, of looking all around, is what allows you to see through your own willed ignorance, to see through the tricks the mind plays on itself. Otherwise, when you’re getting good at a particular technique, pride can easily develop around that. You think that the technique is going to do everything.

This is called *silabbata-paramasa*—clinging to habits and practices. We tend to think of this term as dealing with rituals, but that’s not its only meaning. After all, *silabbata* means habits and practices. We do develop good habits in the path. We do develop good practices: the practice of mindfulness, the practice of concentration. But the idea that simply mastering the mechanics of the practice is going to be enough for awakening: That’s a major fetter. It’s one of the first fetters we to free ourselves from, and the first level of awakening is what allows us to see through it.

How does it do that? As I said earlier, the mind is constantly engaging in becoming. When you’re practicing mindfulness, there’s a level of becoming right there. When you’re practicing concentration, there’s a level of becoming right there. You create these worlds out of the raw material of your physical sensations and mental activities, and doing this involves blocking out certain things. To stay focused on one object of concentration, one frame of reference for your mindfulness, involves blocking out other things. But you work on it, you master maintaining the stillness of this focus, even though it creates a blind spot in the beginning parts of the practice. You need to do that because only when you’ve solidified the stillness can you begin to see around it. Your range of vision widens

to include more and more of this blind spot behind you, until eventually you see the little “I” in there, the little “me” in there, that’s manipulating all these activities.

In the beginning, it’s an uncertain “me” because the practice is hard, and you find yourself slipping off, slipping off. But after a while, as you get more and more accomplished, there’s a pride in accomplishment that comes with it: “I can do this. Let’s see how well I can do that.” You need to allow that sense of confidence to function: the desire to do the practice really skillfully, to really master this. Then you’ll develop a sense of pride that comes with mastery and skill.

Otherwise, if you don’t work at things in this way, you get stuck in the idea that the practice shouldn’t take work, that you shouldn’t try to develop anything. All you need to do is let go of everything all at once, and there you are: the quick fix, the impatient fix. And of course there’s the pride that goes with that attitude, too: the sense that you’re beyond having to put any effort into the practice. But it’s a useless pride. It doesn’t go anywhere. You have to put that useless pride aside, and instead develop the humility that realizes that this is something you really have to work hard on.

But it’s not all hard work. After all, you’re working with a sense of pleasure here. And you get better and better at it. The pleasure gets more refined, more subtle, more continuous. This is an important thing you’ve got to work on. But as the Buddha points out, you can still create a very subtle sense of pride around your accomplishment. He says, “That’s the difference between a true person and an untrue person.” He asked for one quality in his students. “Bring me,” he said, “a person who’s honest and no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” After all, it’s our ability to deceive not only others, but also ourselves that’s the big issue in the practice. And it’s your willingness to see through your own self-deceit that’s going to make all the difference.

This is how the practice captures that self-deceit: You corner it in the little sense of self-hiding behind the concentration, saying, “I’m pretty good here. I’m better than those other people who don’t have my level of attainment.” Once you’ve cornered it, you can turn around and see it clearly. As Ven. Ananda states, you need to use conceit to get started on the practice, but there comes a point, after the conceit has made you skillful, where you need to see it in action and realize that you don’t want to create it any more.

So meditation is not just a matter of mastering the technique. Once the technique is mastered, you need to keep at it, to look around, until you see the blind spots still there in the mind. Even when you develop really great powers of mindfulness, really great concentration, there can still be these blind spots—the

mind's habitual areas of tricking itself, hiding its motives from itself. That's where circumspection comes in. It's what allows you to see all around until you finally see the trickiness of the mind. That's when you can let it go. You can just drop it because you realize that so much of your life has been wasted with the mind playing tricks on itself.

This is why awakening is a chastening experience. If it were simply a matter of having mastered a technique, there could still be the pride going along with the mastery. Of course, the technique is necessary as part of the strategy, but it's not an end in and of itself. It's only the foundation for the insight and circumspection that allow you to see the mind's own self deceptions, its willed ignorance, the tricks it's been playing on itself while looking for quick and dirty ways for getting happy.

You have to use the technique, staying with the breath, staying with the body, to look around, so that you can catch the mind in the act of lying to itself, hiding things from itself, and then you can grow up. This insight is chastening because it enables you to realize the mind's deceptions, its willingness to do stupid things even though it knows better.

So gaining that insight doesn't come with a moment of pride; it comes with a moment of feeling chastised—and then growing up.

For this reason, work on this quality of circumspection, this quality of being very, very observant as you master the technique, because your powers of observation allow you not only to gain more and more skill with the technique, but also to see through the curtains you've set up in the mind. Only by seeing through the curtains can you unfetter the mind and make it free.