

Meticulous

April 28, 2013

I read a piece recently by a journalist. A man had met with a group of journalists and told them about his experiment that for four years, he stayed away from newspapers, magazines, and other things like that. He told them he was feeling a lot healthier, both mentally and physically, as a result.

So of course, the journalist writes an article about how, yes, perhaps the news cycles are invading our minds a little bit too much, but if you don't keep up on world affairs, you're a narrow person, she said. So she ended up justifying the fact that the news cycle is still invading our minds, and somehow it makes us better people to know lots of information about things over which we have no control.

It's not bad to be informed, but you have to realize that there is a really important part of your life where you *do* have some control, and we all tend to overlook that. Try to notice the machinations of your own mind right here and now. That's the important news of the day because it's an area where you have some control, and yet all too often we relinquish control because we're focusing on other things. So it's really important that we focus in on *here* because this is really where you *can* make a difference.

When the mind chooses to focus on the breath or on something else, there is a moment when you can influence that choice. All too often, when we're aware of the fact that the choice was made, we're already off some place else. We don't see clearly what led up to the choice. That's because we've gotten so used to throwing up barriers in the mind and pay attention to something only when it's full-blown. But it's important as a meditator that you get to look at the process earlier and earlier on.

And how do you do that? Well, not by simply just watching everything arising and passing away, because what you're focusing on then is just basically surfing from one full-blown thought to another full-blown thought. What you have to do

is sense that a thought has arisen and cut it off just as quickly as you can. And when another thought arises, cut that off even more quickly—not when it's arisen, but as it's gathering itself to arise. In the meantime, stay with the breath.

An image I've found useful is a spider in a web. The spider has its spot usually in the corner of the web. This is where the image doesn't quite work because, for the mind, it works best if you're some place in the middle of the body, or at least on that line from the very top of your head down through the center of the body. As you begin to notice that as a thought is beginning to form, there's going to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. You immediately go there, unravel the tension, and come right back. The more quickly you can do this, the closer and closer you get to the beginning of the stirring in that energy field.

There is a point where it could either be simply a physical event, or it could be something mental. The mind has a habit of clamping on these things going on in the body and suddenly deciding whether it's going to be read as a mental event or as a physical event. If you label it as a mental event, then you run with it, deciding that it's a thought about x. And then you get involved in weaving the thought world around x. So the first lesson you have to learn about this is that if you're weaving something, you don't have to complete the weave. Just let it drop with all its unraveled ends. The compulsion to complete a thought and *then* let go of it: That's something you've got to fight.

Then, as you get quicker and quicker, you get earlier and earlier in the stage of the weaving until you get to that point where the mind is making a choice. It's chosen already that it's a thought. But then the next choice is: Do you want to run with it? If you get quicker than that, you get to the point where it's choosing whether it's a physical event or a mental event. And as you get closer and closer to the beginning of these points in the process, the more arbitrary the whole thing seems. This is one of the ways in which you develop discernment through the practice of perfecting or mastering your concentration.

All too often, it's thought that you work on concentration, and then you set aside the concentration to work on insight. That's not how the Buddha taught it; that's not how the ajans taught it. Actually it's in the process of developing the mind in concentration that you learn a lot of things about the processes of the mind—not only seeing the processes, but seeing them as fabrication. When you see them as fabrication, you begin to realize: This is all pretty arbitrary. Then it's easier to develop a sense of disenchantment and dispassion around these things. So it's worth your while to spend a lot of time on the mechanics of your concentration, because through mastering the mechanics of the concentration, you see the mechanics of the mind.

It's the same with the precepts. Ajahn Chah has a nice passage where he says that in the beginning, you've really got to pay very, very careful attention to your precepts—to the point where you get obsessive about them. Then he says, "Okay, even though you may be going overboard, it's an important stage in the practice. Don't short-circuit it by saying, 'Well, I'm getting really bored, or really stressed out. I'd better relax and have a more easygoing attitude toward the precepts.'" It's in the desire to get things right you begin to notice areas where you've been unskillful that you didn't see before. This is how you get more and more sensitive, and you say: "Oh. Something that I thought was actually okay is *not* okay." Or: "An area where I thought I could fudge the precept, you can't really fudge it. You've got to be careful." And some people feel: "Well, if I know it's a stage I'm going to go through, I'm just going to skip the stage." No, you've got to go through the stage, because it's in this way that the mind gets more sensitive.

Your mindfulness, your alertness, your discernment get more and more refined because you begin to realize the implications of your actions that you never noticed before. And if you can't do this with your words and deeds, there's *no way* you're going to be able to do it with the subtle movements of the mind. It's in seeing cause and effect—and particularly the difference between a skillful way of speaking and an unskillful way of speaking, a skillful way of acting and

an unskillful way of acting, and noticing the ramifications of your words and deeds—that you develop the sensitivity and the quickness to know the even more subtle ramifications of events in the mind.

So it's in the very meticulous practice of the precepts and the very meticulous attention you pay to making sure the mind really does stay with the breath—really does stay with the object of your concentration—that discernment develops. It's not that you rush through the precepts or through concentration so you can quickly get to the goal. You *do* need a sense of urgency, but you don't want the urgency to make you rush in ways that you start getting sloppy. The energy of the urgency should be focused on doing things very meticulously, being very responsible about your precepts, being very responsible about your concentration.

Because what is it we're studying? We're not studying something that's in books. We're studying the movements of our own minds, and you see those movements most clearly as you try to clean up your precepts, as you try to make your concentration more solid.

This is the point that Ajahn Chah was aiming at when he constantly talked about how virtue, concentration, and discernment are all the same thing. It's not that you pick up one and then drop it when you go on to the next. You just get better and better at this one thing: virtue-concentration-discernment. And that's how *all* the aspects of the path grow together.