Analysis of Qualities

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There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when you want to get the mind into strong concentration, it requires both tranquility and insight. We tend to think of insight as something that comes after the concentration. But the Buddha’s making an important point. If you’re going to get the mind to settle down, you have to understand what you’re doing. At the very least, you have to understand which qualities of the mind are skillful, that are helpful for the concentration, and which ones are obstacles. That’s the duty of this factor of awakening. It’s called analysis of qualities. The qualities we’re talking about here are qualities in your mind, events in the mind. And as you try to focus on the breath, there will be other thoughts coming into the mind. Now, some of them are actually useful. The thoughts that say, “Is the breath comfortable? Could it be made more comfortable? You’re not just lulling it to sleep. You’re trying to figure it out.” Then, of course, there are the thoughts that would pull you away. So you have to learn how to recognize them. That’s the role of discernment in getting the mind into concentration. That’s the role of insight. So as you’re sitting here, what kind of questions are worth asking? Putting the mind in the breath together, you’re trying to use pleasure as the glue to stick them together. So how do you deal with the breath in a way that’s pleasant? How do you deal with your mind in a way that it feels willing to settle down, finds pleasure in settling down? Because the mind is a traveler, it’s a wanderer. That’s what samsara is all about. We tend to think of samsara as a place, but actually it’s an activity that we do. We create states of becoming in the mind and then we move into them. And as they fall apart, we create some more and move into those to keep on going, going, going. So here we’re trying to settle down and stay. Some of the lessons you learn from creating states of becoming will be useful here. You have to have something in mind that’s your main focus. And you ask yourself, “What is the world of this focus?” Well, the world is going to be your body as you feel it from within. And then you, as the meditator, the part of the mind that’s directing things, that’s the identity you take in that world. So you actually are creating a state of becoming, but this is one that’s designed, for the time being at least, for you to settle in. It’s like a house where you’re more and more conscious of how the house is built together. Because becoming is the big problem in the mind. And the best way to understand it is to create some good becomeings, transparent becomeings. So you think about the world that you’re in. The world here is going to be the breath in the body. Where do you feel the breath in the body? We know that the air comes in and out through the nose, goes into the lungs. But for it to do that requires movement of energy in the different parts of the body. Some of the most obvious ones are in the face, in the neck, in the chest, the shoulders, the abdomen. There’s no clear line that says this part of the body is involved in the breath process and that part of the body is not, unless you create tension that blocks the breath. So one of the things you might want to do to explore this world is go through the body and ask yourself, “Where do you feel any patterns of tension as you breathe in, as you breathe out?” Can you dissolve those patterns of tension away? Think of them relaxing. Because when there’s no tension, the breath can flow smoothly. That’s what you do in terms of analysis of qualities, in terms of what’s going on in the body. Then what’s going on in the mind? Is your mind ready to settle down? Sometimes as you start meditating, you really do want to settle down and rest. Other times the mind would still like to think about things. It’s got some issues from the day, issues from the week. And it tells you, “Here’s a whole meditation period with nothing else you have to do. Now you can think about this. Now you can think about that. But if you think about this or that, it’s going to waste your time. So you have to make sure the mind is in the right mood. This is why we have those other meditation topics like contemplation of death, recollection of death, recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, recollection of your own generosity and virtue, to incline the mind to see the importance of training it, settling down, developing some concentration. That’s one thing you have to watch out for in the mind. The other thing you have to watch out for is how do you conceive the breath? What mental pictures do you have? How do you talk to yourself about the breath? When you’re spreading good breath energy around, are you pushing it? Because good energy, if you start pushing it, turns into energy that’s not so good anymore. You have to be careful. In dealing with the mind, it’s both an issue of what attitudes you’re bringing in from your daily life, and the other is how you picture the whole process of breathing and being with the breath to yourself. So you want to make adjustments there. This requires a fair amount of thinking and understanding, which is why the Buddha said,”Good, strong concentration has to depend on some insight as well as tranquility.” Now, there are some people who get their mind to settle down with that much thought. They’re not much entangled in the world anyhow to begin with. They find it easy just to put things down, and the mind naturally rests. For them, though, the problem is going to come when there are days when they do have issues in daily life, and they haven’t had experience in taking them apart. They haven’t had experience in wrestling the mind down. And at that point, they’re lost. So the ideal meditation is one in which you combine tranquility and insight. And the insight here is not so much in terms of what you’ve read about the books, but just getting to know what’s going on, sorting out what’s happening in your body, sorting out what’s happening in your mind, to see what’s skillful, what’s not skillful, what should be developed, and what should be abandoned. Because meditation is all about what you’re doing. Sometimes you hear people say, “We meditate so you can see things as they are.” Well, “as they are” will often depend on the perceptions you bring to begin with. So how can you trust that your perceptions haven’t colored things? It’s better to have the attitude you’re going to see things as they work, as they function. In other words, you do this, and those are the results you get. You do that, and these are the results you get. That’s something you can really see in meditation, especially when you measure the results in terms of the sense of ease or lack of ease. That’s something you can see right away. As I said, the best things you know are the things you do. So here, be very clear about the fact that you are doing concentration. You are doing the insight. You are doing the tranquility. Then you want to see what your results are in terms of a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, refreshment. That’s the kind of insight that can get the mind into deeper and deeper concentration. Because as the concentration settles in, you begin to see things more clearly. Subtle levels of stress, they were covered up by your other activities. Now as those activities settle down, these things begin to become more and more clear. You can see it here, too. There may be some very subtle stress going on, even in the concentration. So you figure out, “What am I doing that’s creating that stress?” It’s usually a perception you hold in mind that’s not allowing you to let go of certain things in the body, let go of certain things in the mind. So experiment with different perceptions and see which perceptions are the most calming. This is in line with the Buddha’s instructions, where he says you want to be sensitive to mental fabrication, i.e., feelings and perceptions, and then you want to calm them. What perceptions are most calm? One that I find very calm is instead of thinking of the breath coming in from outside, there’s breath energy originating in the body, and it’s originating with every cell. You hold that perception in mind, the breath becomes very easy and the mind settles down with a broad sense of being solidly here. No one spot in the body is getting too much pressure. So see if that perception is calming to you. If it is, then you’ve learned a lesson about how things function in the mind. It gets you more and more interested in asking more questions, because you really are very clear about what is skillful and what’s not skillful. When the Buddha talks about the seven factors for awakening, there are times when he pairs them with the five hindrances, and the hindrance of doubt is the one where you’re not really clear about what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. Analysis of qualities is what overcomes the doubt. You don’t overcome the doubt by simply saying, “Well, I believe, believe, believe in the Buddha.” You look into your own mind, you look into your own body, and you see what is skillful in giving rise to a sense of well-being inside, what is unskillful, what creates a sense of tension or stress. And when you see that directly, that’s what cuts through the doubt. So doubt is not cleared up by belief, doubt is cleared up by investigation. Investigating right here.

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