Detail Work

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When the Buddha taught the Sixteen Steps of Breath Meditation to his son, Mahula, he didn’t start with the Sixteen Steps. He started with a whole series of contemplations. There seem to be two reasons for why he did this. First was because the practice of breath meditation can be very calming. As the Buddha noticed, in several places, if the mind gets too calm right from the beginning, you go to sleep. You compare it to a fire that’s just barely burning. Then you pour ashes and water on it. It’s going to go out. Instead, you have to add fuel. In this case, you have to energize the mind. One way of energizing the mind is to give it things to think about. One of the contemplations is the Brahma-viharas. You can think about unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, in very vague terms, like a big cloud of goodwill. But it’s also possible to think about them in more specific terms. For instance, you can think of all the people you know who are in the eastern west, spread goodwill to them. Then ask yourself, “Who do you know who is in the west?” Spread goodwill to those people. Go into detail. That energizes the mind. Or you can think about all the people for whom you should be grateful, the things they’ve done for you, starting with your parents. Your teachers, anybody who’s gone out of their way to help you. You can start thinking about all the various authors and artists of the past whose work you’ve found educational and beneficial for you. This kind of contemplation can take a long time, if you want, as you go into the details. It has a good impact on the mind. You realize how much you are indebted to other human beings. Some of them you know personally, some of whom you’ve never met. People living, people dead. You’ve got a long list. I tried this once, very early on in my time as a monk. It took me a whole morning, ever since I’d done a satisfactory job. Or it took me a whole day. Or you can think about specific people who were hard for you to have goodwill for. The people who were cruel, thoughtless, irresponsible. Is there anybody out there that you really would have ill will for? Why would you benefit from seeing their suffering? Sometimes you say, “Well, I’d like to see justice done.” Don’t worry about that. Karma takes care of that. Your duty is to figure out, “If I ever encountered that person, how could I actually behave in a way that would not become bad karma for me?” You’d want to think about helping that person see the error of his or her ways and be willing to change. And you’d be happy. You’d be happy to help them. You don’t need to keep score. So you can think thoughts of goodwill. You can develop them among others in a way that’s very detailed and meticulous. That word “meticulous” appears in the Buddha’s definition of mindfulness. It’s a quality you want to develop. It stirs up your interest in details. And that stirs up the energy in the mind, because it’s easy to slough through the different contemplations and go to sleep. But if you tell yourself, “I’ve got to think about this in detail, try to figure things out,” then it stirs up some energy in the mind so that the mind is ready when the time comes to focus on the breath. Not just to zone out on the sense of ease or pleasure from the breathing. The same way with contemplation of the body. That’s another one of the topics that the Buddha gave to Rahula. You can think about all the different parts of the body that you have inside. The list they give in the Canon is thirty-one. The commentary realized that brains were missing, so they edited it to make thirty-two. And even that’s not complete. The eyes, for instance, are not mentioned. When you think of any one particular part that you find especially incongruous, that you’ve got this part in your body, it’s really weird, not especially attractive. But if you didn’t have it, you’d probably die. It makes you stop and think about this relationship you have to the body. You’re dependent on things that are unattractive. Why did you choose this? Would you want to choose it again? The contemplation is there to get you thinking. For instance, you might think about the bones. Visualize the first joints of the fingers and the thumbs. Where are they right now? Pay attention to how they feel—that part of the body. Is there any tension or tightness around those bones? Then move up to the next joints. Relax any tension around them. The third joints—the bones of the palms of the hands, the wrists, the forearms, the elbows, the upper arms, the shoulders, the shoulder blades. Then go down to the toes, the first joints of the toes. Work up through the toes, the feet, the ankles, the shins, the knees, the thighs, the pelvis. Then start at the spine, starting with the tailbone and working up one vertebra at a time. When you get to the thorax, add the ribs. Finally, you get to the skull. Realize the skull is all around your head right now. Then think of the whole skeleton. Jon Fung had a student one time. He told her to contemplate the hair on her head, to remove all the hair in her imagination, and then plan it back. After a few minutes, she said, “Okay, I’m done.” He said, “That was too fast.” You can pull it out by handfuls, but when you re-plan it, plan it one hair at a time. Again, the fact that you’re doing this in a meticulous way is what wakes you up. You have to be mindful to be meticulous. It energizes you, and it develops good habits. This is the other reason why the Buddha would have you develop these habits. Contemplations. As you get used to being meticulous in your imagination, you start noticing other details around you. This is what you need as you get the mind into breath meditation. You’re using the breath as a foundation to look into the mind, to understand feelings, understand mental qualities. You want to understand them in detail. Because it’s the little details that make all the difference. Greed starts with a tiny, tiny seed. Anger starts. Jealousy. All these things start very small, and you want to catch them when they’re small, because it’s when they first start that you can understand what’s the origination, what’s the allure. Things you’re going to need to know when you get beyond them. Like the seeds of redwood trees. They’re very small. They can grow into huge, big trees. They’re about the size of rice grains, but they become enormous. Although maybe that’s not a good analogy, because it takes a long time for the trees to grow that large. The defilements in their seed form are more like little sparks that start a fire. The fire can spread very fast, and you don’t want to wait until it’s spread, because then it’s hard to contain it. You want to catch these things when they’re small. So by making more habitually meticulous, you see details in other things as well. Meticulous in what you do allows you to see details in other things. This is what makes you observant. You want to see the details and think about relations. That’s what the Brahmavaras are for—thinking about what your relations are with other people around you. You want to develop what I call the Ajahn’s glance. Years back, I was up in Seattle, and the people who were hosting me took me to see the public library there, which is very interesting in its architecture. It was common in the different details that whoever the architect who designed this had put a lot of thought into it. One of the women who was hosting said, “You’re not like other monks who notice things.” My first thought was, “What kind of monks have you been hanging around?” In my years with the Chan Phuong, he noticed little details right away. There was that time we flew into Washington, D.C. at Dulles Airport. To give you some background, we built the jetty in Wat Thammasatit and the Buddha Image. The architect who designed the jetty and the base for the Buddha Image was a friend of Aro Saranam, and he’d used very simple lines like Saranam would. So when we got to Dulles Airport, I pointed out the main terminal. The roof was like a big hammock. This, too, was designed by Saranam. He glanced at it and didn’t seem all that interested. But then when we got back to Thailand, I found that he’d commented to the architect in great detail about the design of the roof. Part of this was from the fact that we had actually helped build those things. When you build things, you notice details that you wouldn’t if you hadn’t actually done the building yourself. And part of it was that he’d developed that habit of being very observant. So you want to be meticulous in these contemplations. When you get into that habit of being meticulous, you begin to notice other things around you and other things inside you. And you take an interest. You don’t just go through the motions. Take an interest in what you’re doing. Because here you are. You’ve got this mind that wants happiness, and you need to keep doing things that can cause suffering. What are you missing? You’re missing details. They’re all right here. All the things you need to know for awakening are right here, and you’re missing them because you haven’t developed the habit of being meticulous. You haven’t developed that glance that takes things in. So when you find yourself getting drowsy in the meditation, when your energy is down, give yourself work to do. Work inside. Work in your body here in the present moment. It’ll wake you up and it’ll develop some good habits. And don’t think that these contemplations will get in the way of your concentration, that too much interest in things outside will become a disturbance. It doesn’t have to be that way. Think of Ajahn Lee. Among Ajahn Mun’s students, he was famous for having the strongest concentration, but he also had a very inquisitive mind. If he met up with anybody who had any education in science, he would quiz them about their knowledge. Ajahn Fung once mentioned that, “If Ajahn Lee had met me, he’d really pick my brain.” Now, that kind of interest can get in the way, but you can use that habit of being interested, of being curious, and turn it on your own mind. Try to understand your greed, your aversion, your delusion. Understand the workings of the mind that may be getting in the way of your concentration. Take an interest in the skills that are needed, because concentration is not a dulling of the mind. If it’s done right, it sharpens things. Because it’s quiet, it allows subtle things to appear. But you have to combine the quiet with an interest, a curiosity, an inquisitive attitude. So use these contemplations to develop that attitude. It’ll help make your training all the right. [BIRDS CHIRPING]

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