Tuning Your Lute

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You probably know the story of Venerable Sona, a monk who was doing meditation, walking meditation, so long that the soles of his feet got torn, bleeding all over the path. He gets discouraged, sits down, tells himself, “Maybe I should just robe. I can make merit. Here I have put all this effort in. I don’t have a thing to show for it. My body is wearing out.” The Buddha reads what’s going on in his mind. He levitates from Vulture’s Peak, comes to stand right in front of Sona. You can imagine how Sona feels. An unskillful thought has gone through his mind, and the Buddha shows up. He was lucky that he had the Buddha doing that. A lot of us sit here with unskillful thoughts going through our minds. Nobody shows up to warn us. When he was a layman, when he played the lute, when the strings of the lute were too loose, did it sound right? No. If they were too tight, did they sound right? No. You have to tune them just right. The same way the Buddha said you take your faculty of persistence and you tune that to what you’re capable of doing, and then you tune the other faculties to that, the faculty of conviction, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, and then you pick up the theme of your meditation. The same way that a person playing a lute would pick up a theme and work with it. So Sona does that, and he ends up becoming an Arahant. In that particular case, he had to tune his persistence down a little bit lower. That doesn’t mean that he would tune the other strings down lower as well. This is where the analogy breaks down. It doesn’t mean that if you put in less effort you also have to have less conviction, less mindfulness, less concentration, less discernment. Actually, it’s more a case of compensating. On days when you’re tired, it’s all too easy to say, “I’m just not going to do anything at all.” That’s not tuning your persistence right. And so you need to encourage yourself. This is where you use your conviction to come in, to remind you how important even the little efforts you make will be. We have a book floating around the monastery about how to learn how to swim. It teaches a lot of good lessons in this direction. One of them is, on the days when you don’t have much time to practice, you put a lot of emphasis on at least getting your form right. It’s the same as when you’re sitting and meditating. When you have a short period of meditation, you might want to be really careful about the posture of your body, and think about the conversation you have inside about how important it is to be sitting even when you’re tired. Because there’ll be a part of the mind that says, “This meditation is not going to go well. Why even bother?” And the proper form is, “Well, do it.” But you can. And maybe you’ll break through. In that case, you need a little extra conviction. You need to raise your level of conviction as your persistence or level of energy goes down. And the same with mindfulness. You have to be really meticulous. Tell yourself that even though you’re going to be sitting for a shorter period of time, probably, make up for the lack of quantity with quality. Be really strict with yourself. As for discernment, here the Buddha would have you think about what you’ve learned in the past. Think about his instructions to Moggallana. The same sort of thing. Moggallana’s nodding. This is before he became an Arahant. He’s sitting there nodding, and the Buddha appears in front of him. One of his recommendations is, “You see, try to repeat the Dhamma that you’ve memorized. You can repeat it in your head. If you’re sitting alone, you can repeat it out loud.” In other words, in this case, even though you don’t have much energy, you try to use what energy you do have to wake yourself up. And you remind yourself of the teachings that you’ve learned to give you encouragement. As for your concentration, you decide you don’t have enough strength to do full body awareness. And it does take strength to do that. Remember the Buddha, after doing his austerities, thinking about doing concentration. After he realized that the austerities were not working, and maybe the first jhana, as he remembered having done when he was a child, might be the true path. But he didn’t have the strength to do it. It does take strength to fill your body with awareness and keep it filled. We talk about resting and concentration, as opposed to doing an exploration of insight practice. But with the resting, you do have to do work. Make a survey around and around and around the body to make sure the breath energies aren’t only opened up, the channels are opened up, and the breath energy can flow, stay opened up. You’re like a hunter who has trap lines. You have to check all your traps, and you finish checking all the traps, and you do it again. Or a better image might be painting the Golden Gate Bridge. They have a permanent crew to paint the bridge, because by the time they’ve gone from one end to the other, they have to go back to where they started and do it again. Because the salt air attacks the paint. In the same way, there’s a part of the mind that wants to simply rest and wallow in the comfort of meditation and concentration. But you have to say no. Because the concentration, if you wallow in it, begins to fall apart. So you have to maintain it. It doesn’t take as much energy as doing insight work, but it does take some energy. So you devote what energy you have to just being really, really still. And as for the discernment you’re going to gain, you say, the discernment that comes from concentration, the discernment that comes from maintaining concentration, is worthwhile. Because you never know what you’re going to see. Something out of the corner of your eye strikes you that you’ve been doing again and again and again, and you’ve never really noticed it. But maybe for once you will. So if you can’t manage whole body awareness, tell yourself, I’ll take one part of the body and hang out right there. And who knows, maybe as you hang out right there, the level of your energy goes up. And then you can start thinking about serving the whole body. Other times, though, the lack of energy is accompanied by sleepiness. In which case, sometimes the breath is not the best topic. You might need something that requires more analysis, more thinking, to wake you up. This is when you can think about the parts of the body. There’s a tendency we have in the West to view body contemplation as being a lower form of meditation. I was reading a nun one time saying that she had been to Thailand for a bit. And she said, well, over there, they think the big problem is the body. But here in the West, we know that the big problem is the mind. But the big problem is the mind’s obsession with the body. And it’s something everybody has to deal with. And there are times when you say, well, I want a higher level of concentration, like the concentration that comes with the breath. But if your mind’s not capable of doing that, work with the body. Because often when you get sleepy, that’s when sensual desire gets really strong. The mind wants to relax in some nice sensual fantasies. So instead of sensual fantasies, you poison the fantasies. You don’t worry whether it’s a high level practice or a low level practice. Buddha said contemplation of the body is for those who have strong defilements. Well, maybe you do have strong defilements. You have to work with them. And John Lee warns about seeing that some levels of the Dhamma are high and others are low. And that you want to aim just for the highest parts. But the low parts are basically foundational. They’re foundational because they’re so important. And you have to keep coming back to them. Like that story of the tennis pro whose game went into a slump. He couldn’t figure out why. He changed his racket. That didn’t work. He changed his manager. That didn’t work. He changed his trainers. That didn’t work. Finally he realized he wasn’t keeping his eye on the ball. Number one lesson in tennis. The number one lessons are there because they’re important. You have to keep coming back to them. So tuning your lute doesn’t mean that everything goes up or everything goes down. When the level of energy goes down, you have to compensate. Strengthen your conviction. If you can get the mind focused, okay, maybe focus on a small part of the body, but make it really strong. Do whatever it is needed to. Lift your level of energy. Then you can retune your lute as you play. It’s important that you understand that analogy. It’s not the case that everything goes up together or down together. The lute of your mind is not like a physical lute. When one quality is weak, you have to compensate by making other qualities strong. And that’s how you can pick up your theme and play.

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