

Dhamma Books & the Actuality

January 1, 2011

“One who is ardent with respect for concentration” – one of the passages we chanted just now. Those are the two qualities you want to bring to your concentration practice: ardency and respect.

The respect is in the motivation, realizing that there’s a lot to be learned right here, and the only way you’re going to learn from it is to respect it. It’s like learning from a teacher in school. It’s very hard to learn from the teachers you don’t respect. You can’t really believe that there’s any reason to open up to them. What do they have to offer? The mind closes its door and no new knowledge comes in. So you have to learn how to develop respect for concentration if you’re going to learn from it.

There’s a common tendency to read the books and say, “Well, I know all about that topic. I’ll just do the concentration so that I can confirm my knowledge, and then I’ll move on to the next step.” But that’s not how it works. As the Buddha says, there are three ways of gaining discernment. One is through listening, another is through thinking things through, and the third is through developing. And it’s only the third that’s really liberating. The first two simply get you oriented properly so that you realize that you really do have to train the mind.

If you’re going to look for happiness, especially a happiness that’s solid and secure, the mind needs to be trained so that its thoughts don’t go and destroy its happiness. So that’s the orientation part – the directing part. But just being directed is not enough. You actually have to get down and do the work. That’s where the ardency goes into the concentration. You really put the effort in, and it’s in the course of doing the concentration that you learn what the words are actually all about – the words that you heard, the words that you thought about.

It’s like the difference between reading a map and actually going to the place depicted by the map. The map may be useful in giving you a general orientation, but when you actually get there, there are a lot of things that are not on the map – the things you experience walking, say, on a path through the forest. You can look at a map of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and see all the contour lines and little paths and the symbols for springs and water tanks, and think you have a good concept of the North Rim. When you actually get there, though, you find it’s very different from what you may have conceived. The map can depict only so much. Its purpose is just to make sure you don’t get lost. But as for what you actually see when you get to the North Rim, the map can’t really tell you.

It’s the same with the Dhamma you’ve studied and the Dhamma you’ve thought about. Like the contour lines on a map, they can give you some general ideas. But what you’ll actually see as you develop good qualities in the mind: That’s going to be something the map can’t depict at all.

So the only way to gain the insight you want is through getting the mind settled and concentrated. And you have to give it your full attention, your full respect. Do what you can to develop an interest in the breath. For the time being, that's all there is in the world for you: just how the breath energy works in the body – where you feel the breath energy. When you breathe in, where do you feel it?

Say that the stomach expands; the diaphragm expands to pull the breath in. Actually, the sensation of the stomach and diaphragm expanding is also part of breath. That's what allows the air to be sucked into the lungs. The air is passive. The movement of the stomach and the diaphragm: That's the actual breathing. That's the actual energy you're focusing on. And you want to notice how it relates to different parts of the body. When you're breathing in, which parts of the body tend to be overworked – the parts that are doing the breathing for somebody else in the body? Give them a chance to have a little breath energy of their own.

To see this requires that you're willing to spend a lot of time to really get to know the territory in detail. There's that passage in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* telling about the first time he went up the Mississippi as an apprentice steamboat captain. The captain kept telling him: "Okay, when you go around this bend, this is what it's like; this is what you watch out for. You go around that bend; this is what you have to watch out for. Sometimes the current comes this way. Sometimes it goes that way. There are sandbars and hidden things under the water."

So after a day of that, the captain asked him, "Okay, can you tell me what I told you today?" Mark Twain was surprised that he was expected to memorize all those details, to pay that much attention. The captain said, "If you don't know every bend in the river, accidents can happen easily." Twain suddenly realized that he was going to have to pay a lot more attention to what he was doing than he had thought.

It's the same with the breath. There are lots of bends in the breath, lots of ways the breath can go well, lots of ways it can go not so well, and you want to be on top of them all.

The number one lesson is: Don't let it get mechanical. It's all too easy to say, "Go in-out, in-out, in-out," and while it's in-out, other parts of the mind start looking elsewhere, saying, "Okay, when is the next insight going to come down the river here?" You're not really paying attention to what you're doing, and as a result, you don't learn. Each breath is unique. The body each moment has different needs. So you want to be able to fine-tune the breath so that it meets those needs and can allow for a sense of refreshment.

Think of the cells of the body just filling up with breath energy. Which parts of the body still seem starved? Okay, the next time you breathe in, let those parts get fed as well – and make sure you don't squeeze out the parts you've already fed. This is what allows for a sense of fullness to develop. This is not a matter of holding the breath in the lungs; it's more a matter of allowing the energy flowing through the body to have a sense of fullness – of not being squeezed out like toothpaste in a tube. Everything has to stay full all the way through the in-

breath. And even when the breath goes out, you want to maintain that same sense of fullness in every cell of the body. That's what gives you energy.

As for when you're going to get the classic insights, you just put that aside for the time being. If you spend all your time thinking about the map, you're not really going to see the trees, the leaves, and the other details of actually being on the North Rim.

There's that famous passage in Dogen where he says that the realization of the cessation of suffering is the same thing as the development of the path. Now, some people take that as meaning the path *is* the goal. But that's not what he's saying. He's saying that you have to look in the development of the path to see the realization of suffering. You have to give your full attention to what you're doing – the qualities you're trying to develop now.

In the process, you learn a lot about cause and effect. You learn a lot about where there's stress, where there's suffering – exactly when it happens. We're not dealing in abstractions here; we're dealing in specific events. If what you want is to be tested on the map of the North Rim, you never have to go to the North Rim. Just look at the map. But all you get is a grade on a test. If you take the map, look at it, and then you actually go to the North Rim and look around, you get some really important experiences, really important understandings – things that are memorable.

The same with the practice: We're not here just to confirm what's in the books. We're here to see how the mind creates suffering for itself and what it can do to alleviate that suffering and ultimately put it to an end. There are specific movements in the mind that are actually causing specific instances of suffering. As we're working here on concentration, we're learning to take those movements and direct them in another direction, make them part of the path that goes to the end of suffering. That means that every movement of the mind is something you have to watch. And if it's something that can be turned to this end, use it. If not, you just let it go.

So respect each breath as it comes in and as it goes out. Respect the breath energy in the body. Try to develop a real interest in these things. Here it is: free medicine that can help treat all kinds of illnesses both in the body and the mind. There are certain ways of breathing that aggravate anger, and there are other ways of breathing that can soothe it and calm it down. There are ways of breathing that can aggravate fear or calm it down. You want to learn those details just like every bend in the river. You want to really be familiar with them—and being familiar requires respect.

But this is where the real things are happening. The cause of suffering is not in the books. The cessation of suffering is not in the books. The words are there; the actuality's right here. And it's only by giving full attention to developing the path, full attention to the breath right here, that you're going to see through to the actual truths the Buddha talked. After all, he didn't learn from books; he learned from his own experience. And his teachings are simply pointers to get *us* to look at our own experience and be willing to learn new things.

This is why we have to be ardent as we do this. In other words, really put the effort in to develop skillful qualities when they're not there; to maintain them and develop them when they are; to abandon unskillful qualities and to do what you can to prevent them from happening again. You really work on this. You really develop a desire to do these things, to develop the good qualities so that you can have the insight that comes from development.

So take an interest in what's happening with the breath and how the mind is relating to each breath as it comes in, because it's in the details that the way beyond suffering is found.