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Meditation

First Steps to Control of the Senses

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by

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Every year when the thrice-sacred day of Vesak comes around, we temporarily withdraw our minds from worldly affairs and begin to think devoutly of the Blessed One. We chiefly think of him as the Lord of Compassion and dwell gratefully on the hundreds of rebirths he endured for the sake of suffering humanity, and when trying to picture him before our mind's eye, we think of him as the Lord of Meditation, sitting cross-legged, serene, passionless, majestic—and thus is born a New Year's resolution: that we should take meditation practice seriously this year.

Not many of us, however, can get a kammatthanacariya (a meditation master) to guide us and so we take up a form of meditation that we think we can practise safely without a guide, namely, the brahma vihara (the divine abodes or sublime states). We take ourselves to a lonely spot, sit in a comfortable posture, and proceed to radiate towards the four quarters thoughts of goodwill, compassion, communal

joy and equanimity as described in the suttas. Just when we are feeling satisfied that a good beginning has been made, however, an odd thing happens. We had hoped to have sound sleep that night and pleasant dreams; but the sleep was disturbed and the dreams meaningless and deeply charged with emotion. The next day is even worse; we find ourselves feeling peevish and catch ourselves losing our tempers at the least provocation. So, naturally, our enthusiasm wanes a bit, but we continue the practice half-heartedly for a couple of days more and seeing no improvement, finally give it up. Some people, who are less discreet than ourselves, may take up kasina exercises, with unfortunate results.

What then could have gone wrong in these cases? The error, I think, lay in not fully grasping the purpose of meditation. We think of it in terms of physical exercises undertaken to develop the muscles. We think brahma vihara is like the simple invigorating exercises with which we start a course in physical training. Similarly, we compare kasina exercises to exercises with dumb-bells and hope that the initial strain caused by wrestling with the mind will wear off through regular practice. But mental strain is cumulative and when taken beyond the safe point may lead even to complete mental derangement. The futility of struggling with the mind is graphically described in

the scriptures thus:

> ”So, Aggivessana, I set my teeth, and pressing tongue to palate by an effort of will, I strove to hold down, to force down my mind and so to control it. And as I struggled, Aggivessana, with the effort, the sweat burst forth from my arm pits ….
>
> ”Thus, Aggivessana, was my energy strenuous and unyielding, mindfulness was thus indeed established undisturbed, but my body was perturbed, it was not calmed thereby, because I was overpowered by the stress of my struggling …. (MN 36)”

It may appear to some that the reason for failure in the kasina exercises is understandable but not of the brahma vihara since there was no apparent struggle involved. But here is an analysis of our first attempt: for the first minute or so we were really able to radiate thoughts of goodwill with ease, but some time later we were perturbed to find that our mind had shifted to other thoughts; we then clenched our jaws and balled our fists with determination to concentrate and strangely enough the mind shot off at a tangent in half a minute this time, though it took us much longer to realise it. Then we felt our calves getting benumbed and we changed our posture while trying to maintain

our thoughts of goodwill. In the meantime a fly settled on our nose and started doing callisthenics. While trying to ignore it we were sure an insect was creeping up our spine. By the time we had settled both we had an urge to have a peep at the watch and were aghast to find we had spent twenty minutes, out of which hardly two minutes had been spent on actual concentration. We struggled on for ten minutes more and rose thankfully hoping to do better next time, and feeling that, anyway, the first step in "meditation" had been taken. But we could not escape the consequences of the half-hour struggle.

Before we take up meditation therefore, the necessary preconditions must be fulfilled: "What advantage is gained by training in meditation? The thoughts are trained. And what advantage is gained by training the thoughts? Passion is abandoned" (A. II, 3, 10). Thus, the ultimate purpose of meditation is nothing short of complete passionlessness. Surely then, this cannot be attained by a mere half-hour's seclusion every day when the rest of the time is spent in complete lack of restraint. Meditation is not a magic formula that can miraculously transform us from ordinary sense-enjoyment-loving beings into masters of passionlessness. We might ponder on the fact that concentration is the last step in the Noble Eightfold Path. We should therefore take our whole way of life

in hand and turn to meditation as a help in its transformation. To begin with, we should not take the silas for granted. We should constantly ask ourselves: "Have I injured anyone? Have I thought lustful thoughts? Have I spoken or thought ill of others? Have I been chattering uselessly?" and so on. We should decide to lead consecrated lives. Whenever on a full-moon day we observe ashtanga-sila (Pali: atthangika sila, the Eight Precepts) we feel this sense of consecration. But we should try to maintain this feeling of consecration every minute of our waking hours. It might help us to think that there are certain earth-bound Devas who constantly watch our every thought, word and deed.

While thus rigorously observing the silas, the transformation of our way of life can be hastened by development of awareness of our every thought, word and deed. It is good practice to watch ourselves as we would watch others. This practice gradually weakens verbal thinking, that is, our normal habit of keeping up that incessant, silent commentary on everything we perceive. It is difficult to maintain a continuous flow of such commentary while one is busy watching oneself in a detached way. A warning, however, is necessary. In the beginning, this awareness should be practised only for a few minutes at a time and the mind should not be unduly strained. The whole

practice can be made highly enjoyable by watching one's person as a whole in relation to the environment and not concentrating on the breathing alone, or on the movements of the hands alone or on those of the feet alone. When the mind is thus allowed to rove over the whole person, enjoyment can be derived out of this practice. The mind, in its normal functioning, alternately flits outward for a few seconds towards objects of sense and then inwards for a few seconds to maintain verbal thinking. The practice of self-awareness, however, gradually makes our perceptions more acute while at the same time attenuating verbal thinking. It is as if a man who had been gradually becoming myopic but had not realised that his vision was blurred were to wear spectacles of the correct power and he suddenly sees the world in sharp focus in all its glory of riotous colour and light and shade.

Care should be taken however, to make it an enjoyable practice. Whenever there is a feeling of perturbation or of a taut sensation in the head, the practice must be discontinued for some time. Success in this practice depends entirely on the knowledge that we are reversing our normal values. We normally feel free when the mind runs uncontrolled after sense-objects and we feel fettered when our thoughts are controlled. We must realise that it is no true freedom when thoughts think themselves but it is real freedom

when we think them. Every little mastery we gain on our thoughts should therefore bring us pleasure. When we have reached that stage where we derive actual pleasure out of this practice we shall have created the preconditions for the practice of concentration. For there is no concentration without calming of the body and mind, and there is no calming of the body and mind without a feeling of joy permeating the whole body and mind.

The above important truth has been well illustrated in the Anapanasamyutta (Sutta No. 9). The Lord, after describing in many ways the advantages of contemplation of loathsomeness, goes into retreat for fifteen days. On return from retreat, however, the Lord finds that the monks had become so disgusted with life that half of them had committed suicide. The Lord, therefore, called the monks together and warned them against the practice of concentration without preliminary calming of the body and mind, and for this recommended the practice of anapanasati—but the operative sentences in this practice are: "Calming this body-compound I breathe in and breathe out. Feeling rapture I breathe in and breathe out. Feeling joy I breathe in and breathe out."

Concentration practice at all times must be undertaken under able guidance, but even simple exercises to be harmless and fruitful must be

undertaken only after a determined effort to lead a consecrated life, a life of purity and joyous self-awareness in which concentration exercises shall take their rightful place. This is the least we can do to show our eternal gratitude to the Compassionate One.

Control of the Senses

When the Bodhisatta had failed to attain the goal by means of the formless concentration attainments and the extreme austerities and penances, he said to himself: "I recall how, when my father the Sakyan was at work, I sat in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree and aloof from the pleasures of the senses, aloof from unwholesome states of mind, I entered upon and abode in the first jhana which has thought conception and discursive thinking, is born of aloofness and has rapture and happiness. Could this, I wonder, be the way to wisdom?" And on this occasion came to the Bodhisatta the consciousness that follows truth: "Yes. This is the way to wisdom." (MN 36) And after developing the four jhanas one after another the highest wisdom was attained.

And we, who have been following the noble quest with bated breath, wonder whether we too could follow the method of the jhanas on the way to

Nibbana. But the only descriptions we find of the jhanas in the Sutta Pitaka are in a set of recurring formulae similar to the one given above on the first jhana and we have to turn to tradition for the actual practice. But the formula for the first jhana has certain interesting and intriguing expressions—the chief of them, which concerns us here, being the set of phrases "aloof from pleasures of the senses" and "aloof from unwholesome states of mind."

What does "aloofness" signify in the above context? It conjures up in our minds the picture of a man standing safe on a rocky promontory while the waves in all their fury dash vainly against the rocks. To some extent, in our work-a-day world in the midst of sense-objects, we can imagine this aloofness to consist in turning the eyes away from a beautiful object or turning a deaf ear to a catchy tune. But how does one remain aloof amidst a flood of thoughts while sitting in seclusion far from the distractions of the sense-objects of the world? We can think of various things to do when unwholesome thoughts arise. We can, as described in the Vitakkasanthana Sutta, [1] suppress them or ignore them, or replace them with wholesome thoughts, or we might ponder over their evil consequences, or try to remove the causes that gave rise to them. But we cannot imagine what it is to be aloof from them. A deeper study of the Suttas,

however, shows us that the word “aloofness” refers to a powerful psychological method for overcoming unwholesome propensities. The Blessed One had evolved a general approach for the mastery of some of the problems that arise in the way of the aspirant for Nibbana, and the attainment of aloofness in the first jhana is but an example of such an approach necessarily modified according to the needs of the occasion.

This method cannot be better understood than by studying its application to the closely allied subject of control of the senses. But before any method can be really successful, however, we must start with the purification of our attitudes towards the world in general and to sense control in particular. We must eschew all dogmas because dogmas are the shackles that hinder all spiritual progress. Suppose one believes that there is a destiny that shapes all our ends and at the same time recognises the need to struggle to control our senses (a not uncommon combination of views in this world). Let us also suppose that he encounters a particularly attractive object of desire, and it would be the line of least resistance for him to surrender to the desire saying “I was destined to do it.” Again one may have a theory that the attainment of a jhanic state is a sign of spiritual perfection—in this case one would naturally put more emphasis on the

methods leading to the jhanic state, looking upon control of senses as just an adjunct to the attainment of the state. On the other hand, one may go to the other extreme and think that leading the good life and control of the senses are ends in themselves. The right attitude in these matters is to consider every attainment as but a step to a higher one, the final aim being nothing short of unconditioned Nibbana.

This apparent digression was found necessary as it is easy to be dogmatic about what are and what are not the right methods to use for the control of the senses. Ideas based on a naive interpretation of the First Sermon have resulted in the view that all austerities are to be condemned. But we have only to refer to the Bodhisatta's reply to Namuci (Mara) on the banks of the Nerañjara when the latter tried to dissuade him from pursuing a life of severe austerity:

> "While dries the blood, my bile and phlegm dry up;
> While wastes the flesh, mind more serene becomes.
> Steadier awareness, wisdom, mind-intent.
> While thus I live, enduring utmost pain,
> Mind seeks no pleasures. See a being cleansed."
>
> (Sutta Nipata v. 434; from *Woven Cadences*, by E. M. Hare)

What the Blessed One condemned was a theory of "Purification by Austerities" unrelated to the actual effects of austerities on one's unwholesome propensities. So, in an individual case, if austerities like seclusion, fasting, sleeping on hard beds or a rough life in general help in controlling the senses, they may certainly be practised. If, on the other hand, they merely sour the disposition and make one irritable, it would be better not to practise them, or to practise them with less severity. What is meant to be emphasised here, is that though we are about to discuss a powerful but purely psychological method for control of the senses, a psycho-physical approach, if found helpful, should not be ignored.

The control of the senses, in order to be effectively mastered, must find a definite place in a psychologically sound scheme for the attainment of Nibbana. It is in fact so placed in schemes described at several places in the discourses. The monk who undertakes the discipline first fulfils the rules of the order. They are of the nature of "don'ts" which inculcate in him good moral habits. The accent here is on the negative aspects of self-control namely, the restraining from doing evil things. There is no emphasis yet on the positive aspects which must deal essentially with the mind. The next step is the development of contentment—contentment with the

meagre requirements of a bhikkhu's life; this step is for bringing his mental life into harmony with a life of physical restraints. Once this basis has been laid, we come to mental culture proper with the control of the senses. Here is how the oft-repeated formula runs:

> "In perceiving a form with the eye, a sound with the ear, an odour with the nose, a taste with the tongue, an impression with the body, an object with the mind, he dwells neither on the whole nor its attributes. And he tries to ward off that which, by being unguarded in his senses, might give rise to evil and unwholesome states, to greed and sorrow; he watches over his senses, keeps his senses under control."

At first sight one might be inclined to think that the method is a trivial one—that of simply trying to ignore unwholesome thoughts as and when they arise. We can understand the full implications of the method if we consider an example from everyday life. Suppose one had to cross a busy street at a place where there is no pedestrian crossing. What does one do? One looks to the left and to the right at the traffic from both sides; one judges the speeds at which the various vehicles are running and cautiously walks across the street, sometimes walking slowly to allow a fast vehicle to

run past, sometimes walking fast to go ahead before a slower vehicle has time to come up; one proceeds thus warily and alertly till one reaches the safety of the sidewalk on the other side.

Now let us analyse the various factors involved in this process. In looking to the left and to the right, alertness is involved; in looking at the various vehicles and judging their speeds, analysis is involved. In the cautious walk across the street and in the regulation of one's speed, both alertness and judgement based on the initial analysis are involved. But these two factors do not describe the whole process. To find out what extra factor is involved, we have merely to visualise under what conditions disaster might occur. While looking at an oncoming car, one's attention might be arrested by its beauty or by the fact that its occupants are known to one. To the extent one pays more attention to one vehicle, one naturally pays less attention to others, and the result is sure disaster. One can be successful only when one's attention dwells on a vehicle just long enough to judge its speed and position and no more. If, on the other hand, one pays less attention than necessary, disaster is sure to follow.

If the above analysis has been carefully followed it should be easy to understand the factors involved in the method for developing control over the senses. The words "In perceiving a form with the eye … an

object with the mind" refer to the preliminary act by which the mind is in fact allowed to dwell for the necessary length of time on the thing perceived—this is in contradiction to the view of those who might think that the proper thing to do is to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to things, because to ignore things is to court disaster as surely as it is to ignore the traffic in a busy street. Once this preliminary act is over, it is as dangerous to allow the mind to dwell on the whole of an object or its attributes as it is to pay attention to the occupants of a car or its beauty when it is speeding towards one in the middle of a busy street. The factor of analysis is referred to in the words, "And he tries to ward off that which by being unguarded in his senses might give rise to evil and unwholesome states"—that is, he knows beforehand, through analysis, what evil and unwholesome states of mind might arise if one foolishly allows the mind to dwell too long on the objects of perception. This contradicts the view of those who believe that objects of thought should not be analysed or judged. The factor of alertness is referred to in the words "He watches over his senses."

If, as explained above, ignoring of thoughts is to be considered dangerous, one may raise the objection that this contradicts the teaching of the Blessed One in the Vitakkasanthana Sutta, where ignoring of thoughts is one of the methods advocated. The answer is that

while the Vitakkasanthana Sutta refers to a mind already overcome by unwholesome thoughts, the method for control over the senses is for a mind that is on guard against the arising of unwholesome thoughts. We may compare the former to the case of a man who is in the hands of the enemy and therefore has to use every possible method to escape, and the latter to the case of a man who carries a weapon in his hand, at sight of which the enemy slinks from sight. Or we may compare the former to medicine taken when one is ill while the latter can be compared to a protective inoculation. Indeed, control over the senses is for the development of spiritual strength as against mere morality.

To come to the actual practice of control over the senses, it must once again be emphasised that it is not advisable to undertake the practice of any part of the Teaching in isolation, unrelated to the rest of the Noble Eightfold Path. Therefore, before any further steps are taken, one must ensure that one has made some progress in sila or moral habits as represented by the five precepts for laymen and Patimokkha (the code of discipline) for monks, the guiding principles in their practice being hiri (shame) and ottappa (fear of the consequences of one's actions). The next step is to analyse one's own character. Though characters in general can be classified into three types, namely,

those in which lust predominates, those in which hatred predominates, and those in which delusion predominates, so far as our contacts with society are concerned, it is the first two that are most important. A careful analysis can tell which of the two tendencies is predominant in us. If we are of the type that constantly looks out for pleasant things and are easily pleased when we get them, if even plain or ugly objects excite lustful thoughts in us, we have lust predominant in our character. If, on the other hand, we are hard to please and are inclined to find fault with even the good and the innocent, we can be sure that hatred is our dominant characteristic. Once we are aware what our dominant traits are, we know what to look out for in our day-to-day intercourse with society. The Anguttara Nikaya (IV 54 f) describes for us, for example, how a person with a predominantly lustful character might behave:

"He associates with women, permitting them to massage his body, or bathe his body or he sits around playing, laughing or joking with them, or he looks deep into a woman's eyes." These activities may be classed under "allowing the mind to dwell on the whole of object"

"Next, he constantly keeps his ear open to listen to feminine sounds coming from over the wall or from the next compound, sounds such as feminine laughter,

women talking, women singing or women weeping; or he sits remembering his last experiences with women—how he used to laugh with them, speak with them, play with them; or he watches greedily other people enjoying themselves." These activities may be classed under "allowing the mind to dwell on the attributes of an object."

It should be possible to make up a similar list of activities indulged in by one in whom hatred predominates. He detests certain individuals and seeks opportunities to quarrel with them. He cannot bear to listen to anything good spoken about them, takes an uncharitable view of even their charitable acts —such might be the results of allowing the mind to dwell on the personalities of the hated ones.

He might be easily irritated by little things, is cantankerous, and a fault-finder, enjoys lecturing even to his friends and loved ones ostensibly "for their own good" but really because he knows it will hurt them. He might even say kind things about a wicked person hoping thereby to irritate good people—such might be the result of dwelling on attributes that tend to trigger his aggressive inclinations.

By not allowing one's mind to dwell on lust-provoking or hatred-provoking things, by refraining from activities such as those described above, one will

be able to watch with joy the growth of spiritual strength within oneself, a visible growth from strength to strength each day demonstrating in actual experience why the Dhamma is called ehi-passiko —"Come and see."

Notes

1. Translated in **Wheel No. 21,** *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts.* **[Back]**

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