Sailing Lessons

August, 2001

There are times when we look at the meditation as a chore, something you have to get through. We should really look at it as an opportunity, because so much of the day our minds are filled with distraction. This job, that job, this has to be done, that has to be done. The window, as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, doesn’t mind having time to be by itself, to heal itself, to get to know itself. That’s an important opportunity. There are so many people out there in the world who don’t have this opportunity at all. So instead of looking at the hour as something you have to get through, look at it as something you want to get the most out of it. Be here for each breath, as it’s coming in and as it’s going out, because it’s in the doing of the practice of the understandings that we want, the happiness that we want, the realizations that we want. It’s right in the doing that they’re discovered. It’s not like a factory process where you just put things in and they have to go through the factory, and then the finished product comes out at the other end. It’s through the processing that we start understanding the mind. If you’re paying attention now, that’s where you’re going to discover these things. If you’re not paying attention now while you’re meditating, when are you going to learn anything? So it’s right here, right now. What you’re doing right here, right now, that’s what you have to look into. What you see right here, right now, it’s not that you’re just sitting here passively observing things or that experience is a given. You’re shaping it. One of the main realizations that you come to in the meditation is that you’re shaping it more than you realize. You play a bigger role in creating your experience of the present moment than you might have thought. So what we’re doing now is trying to play a skillful role in that fabrication. This is why I like to use the word “fabrication” for some karma. It gives a sense of the artificiality of the whole thing. All these things are being put together to create our present moment. If we don’t see the artificiality of the present moment, we’re missing a lot of the dharma. The best way to get a sense of that is to try to do it skillfully, to focus in on the breath, because that’s one of the basic fabrications right there. And again, it seems so much a given, just what’s coming in, going out. It’s already there. It’s already happening, which is true. But as soon as you pay attention to it, you change it. So the question is, how can you pay attention to it in a way that makes it something you’d like to pay attention to, something that’s interesting? This is why we talk about getting a sense of what rhythm feels good right here in the present moment. When there’s a sense of comfort that comes from the breath, how you spread that through the different parts of the body, and how you can use the breath to become more sensitive to other levels of energy in the body, and also other levels of awareness. Awareness isn’t a unitary thing. There are many levels to it. It’s like an onion. It has lots of layers. One important distinction you’ll discover is the difference between the awareness of when you make up your mind, “Okay, I’m going to look at the breath.” Well, who’s the “I” looking at the breath? Is that the only awareness? It is. There is. You’ll discover there’s not. There’s kind of an awareness already there in the body. It’s not that your awareness is centered up here in the head, and the awareness in the head is going to have to get to know the awareness down in the leg. You’ll discover it’s almost like there’s an awareness there in the leg already. I think it was Dogen who once said, “It’s not that we’re practicing mindfulness of the body. We’re just letting the body’s mindfulness, or the body’s awareness, show itself.” You’ll see the distinction as you get to know, “Okay, this is just the basic sensation, and there’s a level of awareness there in the legs and in the arms, and here’s the awareness in the head that’s trying to make sense out of these things, connect these things.” Be aware of those two levels of awareness, because it’s the second one that does a lot of the fabrication. But in the beginning, it’s enough just to get to know the fact, “Yes, there are two levels of awareness going on here in the body,” and then you start noticing the interaction, how certain parts of your awareness of the present moment are a given, something that’s the result of your past karma, and then how much of it is actually willed into being this, into being that, like that basic sensation in the leg. You realize that there is an active identification of the leg, and you may find yourself tensing it up in a particular way just to reaffirm that, “Okay, there’s a leg that has a particular shape that you’re familiar with because you’ve seen it before.” Then you take your sensations, this raw material of energy in the body, and you make that shape out of it. Sometimes you do a good job, and sometimes you mess it up. But just learn how to notice that happening, because it gives you a clue to how you create other things. You realize that there is a huge element of choice in how you create things. Of course, while you’re sitting here meditating, there’s a bigger element of choice. When you’re out dealing with other people, out dealing with other things that may arise in the body, you find that sometimes past karma comes in pretty heavy, and there’s not much choice, without that many choices available to you. But even then, there’s an element of the present intention, what’s willed, both in what you perceive and then willed in what you’re going to do about it. It’s important to see that happening, because otherwise you’ll never gain a sense of what the Buddha taught about the five khandhas, what he taught about skillfulness, all these basic teachings and teachings. The reason he taught about so many things is that they’re all relevant to the present moment. The present moment can be very complex, but when we’re sitting here, we have the opportunity to look at it for long periods of time. You start seeing all the subtleties, and you learn to deal with it a lot more skillfully. It’s like somebody going out in a boat. Sometimes you hit a big wave and the boat capsizes. Some people, after that happens, once they go back on the land, they never go back out on the ocean again. Other people say, “Well, maybe there’s a skill in how to deal with a capsized boat. Maybe there’s even a better skill. When a big wave comes like that, how do you not capsize? How can you stay on the course? The waves and the ocean, that stands for your path. That’s karma. Your skill in using your boat stands for your present karma. That’s what we’re working on here as we meditate, developing more and more skill. Now we take our little boat across the ocean. As we’re meditating, it’s not just an issue of opening up to the present moment. That’s a lot of it right there, but it’s also getting a sense of,”Okay, where do we go from here? What are we doing in the present moment? How can we do it more skillfully?” Once you learn how to relate to the present moment of just the body sitting here, breathing more skillfully, then you can start dealing in other situations in a more skillful way that doesn’t create so much suffering for yourself. This is why we find it hard sometimes to sit and meditate, because all these things come churning up in the mind, and we don’t know how to deal with them. We get overwhelmed. We’re used to their taking over. But the whole purpose of the meditation is not to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by them. We admit that they’re there, and we look at what they do. Sometimes we don’t like seeing what they do, which is what makes the meditation difficult. But that’s the first step in learning how to deal with them skillfully. You start seeing how many times in the course of the day the waves do come and overwhelm your little boat. As if the waves in the ocean weren’t bad enough, sometimes you find that the way you’re steering your boat creates waves for yourself, too. Sometimes the ocean can be perfectly still, and you capsize anyhow. It’s no fun to see that, but you’ve learned a lesson. This is what the mind does. So you get the boat back up, and you practice some more. And you work at it until you finally get to the level where you can handle whatever the ocean throws at you. So you’ve got a whole hour to work on these skills. Be with each breath as it comes in, as it goes out, and get a sense of how to deal with each breath skillfully. When unpleasant things come welling up, okay, see if you can use the breath. Because we’re using the breath as our basic tool here. There’s a some way to breathe. There’s a some way to focus on the breath that helps get you through those waves of emotion, or those waves of impatience, or whatever. And always remind yourself that you can keep learning. If you get capsized once, well, get your boat right back up and try again. If you have that attitude, then there will have to come the day when the boat doesn’t capsize, no matter what comes. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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