Tools for Happiness

October, 2001

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. When it comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know that it’s going out. It’s not all that much. You have to know. The important thing is that you hold on to it. You’ve got to hold on to it. You have to make it comfortable. Otherwise, it’s going to be unpleasant and the mind is going to rebel. So allow the breath to be comfortable. You can adjust it in any way you like. In long, out long. In short, out short. In long, out short. In short, out long. See what rhythm of breathing feels best right now. Once you’ve found a rhythm that feels good, stick with it until it doesn’t feel good anymore, because sometimes the body will change. So try to keep on top of it. Learn to listen to the body to see what kind of breath energy it needs. It’s best in the very beginning to try good long, deep, in-and-out breaths to kind of air everything out, and then allow things to settle down to a rhythm that feels better, feels more natural. Once it gets comfortable, start thinking about sense of comfort spreading out to different parts of your body. Otherwise, if you just stay comfortable, you’re going to go to sleep and start drifting in and out of alertness. So once the breath is comfortable, give the mind work to do. Allow the breath to kind of relax down the back, out the legs, down the shoulders, down the arms. All the internal organs of your body. And as you do this, you find that your sense of place here, the sense of having something that you can settle into, something that you can hold on to, gets more and more stable. It’s like your foundation gets larger, more immovable. Because on the one hand, it’s built on a sense of ease and the body, and on the other hand, it’s built on this sense of mindfulness and alertness you’re developing in the mind as you work with the breath. These are the things you want to hold on to. We often hear that the Buddha teaches us to let everything go, and we don’t let everything go right at the beginning. We let go in stages. Before we can let go of unskillful habits in the mind, we have to start developing skillful ones in their place and learn how to hang on to them. The Buddha doesn’t leave us adrift. Because if we just kind of let go, let go, we just go back to our old habits. You have to develop new habits first before you can let go of your old unskillful habits. And then with practice, you get more and more skillful as you reflect on what you do and the results you get. And then just keep adjusting, adjusting. This principle of reflecting on your actions and the results is something that applies all throughout the practice, the way you interact with people outside and the way you interact with your own mind, the way you interact with the breath. So it’s important that you develop this ability to monitor what you’re doing and to monitor their results. All too often, when we do things, we’re not even conscious of what we’re doing. Then it’s no wonder nothing makes any sense. Everything seems kind of blurred and unclear, chaotic in our lives. Things just seem to happen. We don’t realize that we’re doing a lot of the things that make them happen. We’re not there. We’re only half-conscious of what we’re doing. This is one of the reasons why mindfulness and alertness are so important to develop. You start getting a sense of exactly what you’re doing, where you’re at, what the choices are, what choices you’re making, and what the immediate and long-term results are. It’s a basic principle that if you want to learn anything, you’ve got to have feedback. And not just mechanical feedback, but the kind of feedback you can monitor. You look at what you’ve done. You look at the results. And you make adjustments. So the next time around, you do it better, and then better, and then better. So what we’re holding onto here are tools for dealing with situations in life, both inside and outside, developing these qualities of mindfulness and alertness, giving the mind a place where it can feel at home, where it’s centered inside, its center of gravity. Gravity doesn’t have to keep shifting outside with this person saying that, that person doing this, this bit of news, that bit of news. If your center of gravity is outside, it keeps running around all the time, and no wonder you get worn out. But if it’s inside, stay with the breath, because the breath is always there. Whether you’re sitting and meditating right now or whether you’re out doing other things, the breath is there in the body. You have it available at all times so that you can focus on it at any time. You can settle in any time. You have this sense of inner refuge wherever you go, whatever you do. This, too, is a tool for the mind. It gives it strength. It gives it nourishment. There’s a discourse where the Buddha talks about different qualities you develop in meditation and how they correspond to the things you need in a fortress out at the edge of a frontier. Mindfulness is the sentry at the gate. It keeps watch over whatever comes in, whatever goes out, whatever’s happening around outside. The qualities that you develop in meditation are like the provisions that keep everybody fed inside. So when we talk about holding on, we’re holding on to tools that we need wherever we go, whatever we do, because it’s these qualities of mind that will see us through. So we can catch ourselves when doing unskillful things in thought, word, and deed, and protect ourselves from doing that. This is our major enemy. The enemies are not outside. They’re inside us. Outside enemies, as the Buddha once said, can only kill you. That’s as far as they can go. But your inner enemies can make you miserable for many lifetimes. So those are the ones you have to watch out for. Greed, aversion, delusion—these are the things that destroy our happiness. So we need the tools to detect them, which is what mindfulness and alertness are for. In addition to the meditation techniques, the Buddha gives us the precepts to hold to. Because of those roots for unskillful behavior, delusion is the trickiest. When you’re deluded, you don’t know you’re deluded. So he gives you some firm guidelines in your outer activities, so that you know that if you cross this line, there’s bound to be something wrong going on in the mind. That’s why we have the precepts against killing, against stealing, against illicit sex, against taking antoxicants. Clear-cut boundary markers. So you find yourself in a situation where you’re self-tempted to overstep them. You know, okay, delusion is in there someplace, and there’s probably some aversion as well, or greed, or whatever. So we’re given guidelines. We’re given instructions on what tools we can develop so that we can get more and more independent, engaging our own actions and the results. So we get more and more skillful in the way we deal with other people, more and more skillful in the way we deal with our own minds. Ultimately, this leads to a point where we don’t even need those tools anymore, because there is something deathless within each of us. And as you develop this practice of skillfulness in greater and greater precision, higher and higher levels of subtlety, it finally leads to a place where you open up to that deathless element. And that’s your true refuge, because that doesn’t change at all. It’s outside of space, outside of time. Nothing can touch it. I mean, it’s nice to know that it’s there, but unless you dig down and find it, it doesn’t offer you the kind of refuge that you really need. It’s like knowing there’s gold buried under your house. Simply knowing that it’s there is a nice warm thought. But unless you dig down and get the gold out from underground, it’s not going to pay the bills. So we have to dig down and find what it is that is deathless within us. We’ve found that, okay, and then we’ve got our true refuge. When you’ve got that, then you can let go of everything else, even the tools that got you there. But until you get there, don’t let go of the tools. Hang on tight. Because if you let go of the tools, then you’re in a changing world. They’re the only things that give you any sense of direction, any sense of security, stability. They’re the only protection you have.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0110n1b1%20Tools%20for%20Happiness.mp3>