Skills to Take Home

October, 2002

It’s a beautiful moonlit night out. The air is still. It’s a very soothing time. There’s something very soothing about the light of the moon. Unfortunately, not every circumstance is soothing. Much of our lives is spent in places that are anything but soothing, anything but healthy for the body or the mind. So it’s important that we learn how to look after the body and the mind from the inside, because we can’t depend on outside circumstances all the time. You can’t take the moonlit night with you, but you can take inner skills with you wherever you go. Wherever you go, there’s the breath. Wherever you go, there’s the body. There’s the possibility for mindfulness and alertness. So it’s learning how to use these as medicine for the body, medicine for the mind. That’s the important skill. That’s what you should try to take from a place like this, so that wherever you are, you’re at home with yourself. You’re at home with the present moment, and you have the skills that you need in order to soothe the body, soothe the mind, heal the body, heal the mind, wherever you are. So this is why on a moonlit night like this, we’re not sitting here watching the moon. We’re sitting here watching the breath, because the breath energy has a lot of potential. First off, for dealing with illnesses in the body, aches and pains here and there, malfunctioning organs here and there, it’s amazing how much difference the way you breathe can make on how your body is functioning. It’s worthwhile to take the time to learn which ways of breathing are best for the different parts of the body. It’s one of the great ironies of modern life, is that everyone has so little time for spiritual life, so they want spiritual practice to be boiled down to a few basic principles, a few basic statements, little nuggets of wisdom that should be enough. Of course, you can look back on the lives of people who found this practice, who’ve kept it going. They gave a lot of time to that practice because they realized that this is the practice that’s the most important thing in life. Because at the very least, if you want to really get to know yourself, get to know the body, get to know the mind, it takes time, and you have to be observant. It’s not simply a matter of picking up interesting little bits and pieces of wisdom that strike your fancy or seem to resonate here or there and think that that’s going to be enough. A lot of it has to come from your own powers of observation. For example, with the breath, what way of breathing is good for the different organs in the body? What way of breathing is good for you when you feel tense and irritable? What way of breathing is good for you when you feel exhausted, when you feel low, when you feel too high? How can you breathe in a way that brings you into balance? This is something you want to learn by observing, both for its healing impact on the body and the mind, but also to sharpen your powers of observation because most of the important insights you’re going to gain in the meditation have to come from your own ability to observe unexpected things, things that aren’t in the books. As you sharpen your powers of observation with the breath, it becomes easier and easier to observe what’s going on in the mind as well because the mind is infinitely more subtle than the breath. But it’s not beyond the powers of your mindfulness and your alertness. You begin to catch yourself as you not only breathe in ways that are not good for the body, but also think in ways that are not good for the body, not good for the mind. You begin to see this impact when certain types of thoughts go through the mind and you latch on to them. As the Buddha said, these are diseases in the mind—greed, anger, delusion, passion, aversion, and delusion. If you keep focusing on things of that nature, then of course the mind is going to get worn down. Of course the mind is going to suffer, and the body is going to suffer as well because the two are intimately connected. So it goes from learning how to breathe in healthy ways to how to think in healthy ways, how to manage your mind in a healthy way. You also find that if you just simply try to stamp out unhealthy or unskillful, thought processes, many times the act of stamping out is in itself unskillful. They’re tricks to dealing with the mind, ways of making the mind more and more favorably inclined, feeling more and more comfortable with healthy, skillful processes so that you don’t have to spend so much time warding off the unskillful ones because you’re more and more attracted to the skillful ones. They feel better. The Buddha once compared himself to a doctor. The practice of the Dharma is like practicing medicine on yourself, using mindfulness, using alertness as the basic medicine and the breath as the solvent that gets that medicine into the body. Then you turn and you apply that medicine to the mind as well. You find that you really do have a healing impact, that there’s a greater sense of wholeness in the mind, a greater sense of well-being. You get more and more skillful and more and more observant in what ways of thinking really are good to think. There’s a passage in the text where the Buddha says, “Don’t go by what other people say.” But at the same time, he says, “Don’t go by what you tend to like.” You have to really test the practice in your day-to-day life. Test the practice on your own so that you find what really is good for the mind. As you test it, you get more and more alert and more and more able to test things, and your powers of judgment get more and more subtle. Oftentimes we’re told not to be judgmental, but that doesn’t mean not to be judicious. You have to figure out what’s the line between the two, how the two are different, so that you’re judicious in your thinking, you’re judicious in your breathing. There’s a greater sense of wellness, a greater sense of wholeness, a greater sense of well-being, both for the body and for the mind, so that no matter what the outside environment is, you have the tools, you have the skills you need to make sure that the sense of well-being grows from within. Then it’s simply a matter of learning how to make space for this particular skill so that it has enough space and enough time so that it really can affect a cure. Many times we like to sit and meditate for fifteen minutes and take care of all the problems in life. But as we’re used with any healing process, many times it takes time. There’s no quick pill for mental health, but there is a long-term process of learning how to look after the mind, how to care for the mind, how to develop good habits in how you watch after the mind. Say, right now, while you’re breathing, focusing on the breath, when you notice the mind is wandering off, there are skillful ways of bringing it back, and there are unskillful ways of bringing it back. With time, you begin to detect the difference, so that you learn how to treat yourself better. When I say treat yourself with more goodwill, with more love and kindness, it doesn’t mean indulging yourself, but learn how to be skillful with yourself, learning how to listen to yourself. It’s like raising a child, getting a sense of when you have to be firm and when you have to use various techniques to make the mind more favorably inclined to doing what you want it to do. It’s kind of a carrot-and-stick approach. So you get the good results that you want. It means taking time, being observant. Once you start treating yourself better like this, it’s a lot easier to treat other people better as well. So well-being as somebody has to come from within. It’s based on mindfulness, alertness, and all the other skillful mental qualities that allow you to be skillful in how you manage your mind. How you manage unwanted things that come up in the mind makes it that much easier to deal with the unwanted things that come up outside as well. So you find that this sense of wellness begins to radiate out of you, in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds. And that, in turn, shapes the environment around you. All good things come from within. The good things that come at you from outside, those actually come from, at one point in the past, they came from within. And they’re now coming back at you. But you can’t sit around and simply wait for the results of past good actions. You’ve got to keep doing good, which means being skillful in how you manage your thoughts, in how you manage your intentions. A good way to test it and a good way to learn this skill is how you manage your intentions with regard to the breath, how you use the breathing energy to deal with different sensations as they come up in the body. So you gain more sensitivity, you gain more skill. How does a breath relate to pain? How does a breath relate to pleasure? How can you tell when a certain way of breathing is good for you? These are important things to look into, important things to take time with. So you can have that sense of well-being that comes from within. So no matter where you are, you have that sense of a soothing presence inside, a soothing wholeness inside. That doesn’t depend on there being a moon or still air or a nice set of surroundings, but it’s there all the time, no matter what’s happening outside. These skills are things that you can carry with you, when you have them with you all the time. That’s one of the meanings of the word “refuge.” You’ve got a place inside that you can depend on. As I was saying this morning, when you learn to be true to yourself in being sensitive and skillful in how you manage your mind, that’s the source of all truth in your life. You want to meet truthful people. You want to find out the truth. You yourself have to be true in your practice.

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