Helpful Friends

November, 2002

Try to be on good terms with your breathing, because after all, this is the place where you’re going to settle in. It’s like moving into a neighborhood. You want to be on good terms with your neighbors. Otherwise, they can make life difficult. They can make a lot of noise at night. They can infringe on your territory. And they can throw you out. The body has that potential. After all, the day will come when you have to leave the body. And it’s not because you want to leave. It just becomes impossible to stay here. Or you have the other problem. You want to leave and for some reason just can’t make the separation. But while things are relatively livable here in the body, you want to make them as livable as possible. And that’s what we do with the breath. The breath comes in. Try to breathe in comfortably. When it goes out, you breathe out comfortably. Try to maintain a focus that’s relaxed and not tense. Many times you find that as soon as you focus on a particular part of the body, it tenses up. It shows there’s something wrong with the way you focus. Choose a spot and then relax around your focus. And then try to maintain both the focus and the relaxation. And then when you can do that, allow it to spread. So that from that center, you have these streams of relaxation, streams of awareness going out to fill the whole body. Out every pore. And this way you find that the body suddenly becomes a lot more pleasant place to be. You look after its needs in terms of the breathing energy, and it will look out after you. This is maintaining the proper type of friendship with the body. By maintaining the proper friendship with the right qualities of mind, the ones that ease work towards mindfulness, concentration, discernment. When the Buddha talks about the path and ranking the different factors, he says that right view comes first. Having a proper understanding about cause and effect, about suffering and the path to the end of suffering. Then you couple that with right mindfulness and right effort. But the essence of the path is right concentration. People sometimes complain about the Four Noble Truths, and they say, “Oh, there’s an awful lot about suffering and nothing about happiness.” Well, if you look carefully enough, there it is, in right concentration. A sense of ease, a sense of rapture, a sense of equanimity. That’s where the proper type of well-being comes in our lives, when we use well-being as a path. Instead of thinking of it as a goal in and of itself, it’s something you learn to use. If you stick with well-being, and don’t just wall around it, but you stick at it and see where it can take you, it’ll take you a lot further than you might imagine if it’s done with the proper mindfulness, the proper concentration, the proper understanding. Working on these elements in the mind, directed thought, evaluation associated with the breath, and being really sensitive and really observant. Once you’ve got this kind of friend, or these kinds of friends, these qualities in the mind that get you in the proper relation with the body, then you can look at your other friends—greed, anger, and delusion—and you begin to realize they’re not the true friends you thought they were. A lot of the practice is learning to switch allegiances. Realize that your old friends, you liked your greed, you liked your anger, you liked your delusion. This is our prop. It’s not that we only like the things we’re greedy for. We actually like the greed. We like being angry. There’s something about delusion that we enjoy. We find it natural and easy. It’s learning how to overcome that type of friendship, pull ourselves out of those relationships, and get into new relationships with other qualities in the mind. Because if we use greed, anger, and delusion to relate to the body, then it causes all kinds of suffering. But if we use right mindfulness, directed thought, evaluation, and right view to relate to the body, we can get on good terms. So it’s not so much that the body is the issue. The real issue is the thoughts that come in and out of the mind, the urges, the mental qualities that arise and pass away. Where are our allegiances? Again, as we said the other day, when you’re using the teachings on three characteristics, it’s not meant to be a general comment on the world at large. Use them to evaluate your friends. These thoughts in the mind, where do they lead? What kind of results do they give? If they give a happiness that’s only temporary, impermanent, untrustworthy. If they cause you stress. If they act in ways that are not in your best interest. How can you call them your friends if these were people? We realize that these are unhealthy relationships, some sort of weird codependency going on in the mind. If for some reason, with greed, anger, and delusion, we let them run rampant, through the mind, cause their damage, then we still like them. So it’s learning to see that as an unhealthy relationship. That’s a really important part of discernment. That’s why the Buddha stresses the three characteristics so much in his teachings. He’s not just saying that all of life is inconstant, so you’ve got to learn how to accept it. All life is stressful. All life is not-self, so you just put up with these things, learn how to accept them, and you’re okay. That’s not what he’s teaching. He’s saying, “Use these as standards to judge your friends. Judge the qualities that come in and out of your mind.” In order to help in that judgment, he has you practice the path as well. He doesn’t start people out with the three characteristics. He starts them out by teaching them how to meditate. When he tells people to meditate, he says, “Go do jhana.” Get the mind focused with that steady kind of flame inside. Steady, focused, but relaxed. So you have something to compare your defilements with, something to compare your hindrances with. Otherwise, the teachings of the three characteristics can get pretty depressing. Nothing is permanent. Nothing you can hope for lasts at all. That kind of idea. That gets oppressive. But if you use these teachings to take apart states of mind outside of concentration, then they’re not oppressive at all. They’re liberating. Once the mind gets still, learn how to really appreciate the ease that comes from that stillness. When you get skillful in maintaining this focused center that at the same time feels comfortable and not tense, you’re allowed to spread to the body. You realize that the time and energy spent in maintaining that feeling tone, maintaining that breath of awareness, is a lot more pleasurable than the time spent in pursuing the objects of your greed, anger, and delusion. It makes it that much easier to let those other things go, your old friends go. It’s only when you let go of them that’s when you start learning how to develop a more detached attitude towards your concentration. All too often people say, “Don’t let yourself get attached to concentration. Before you even have it, they advise you to let it go.” I haven’t found any place where the Buddha teaches that. He says, “Go out and do it. Keep getting concentrated. Work at it.” Then, when you’ve mastered it, let go of your other attachments. That’s when you let go of the concentration. Or as the John Foon used to say, “Be crazy about meditating. Do it every time you have a spare moment.” It’s okay to get attached to your concentration because that kind of attachment can be pried loose. He always used to say, “Play with your meditation.” Not in the sense that you play around in a desultory way, but the way a fine musician plays an instrument, or a really good sportsman plays a sport—with dedication, but also enjoying it. If the meditation is grim, it’s very hard to use the meditation as a way of prying yourself away from the other attachments. So try to find a sense of enjoyment with the breath. Find a sense of enjoyment in keeping the mind centered. Make a game out of it. Like this evening, when you leave meditation, see if you can maintain this centered state as you get up, as you walk away, as you go back to the place where you’re going to spend the night. As you sit down and meditate some more, or do walking meditation, see how long you can keep it going. Anything else that gets in the way, you can just drop by the side. When you set these little tasks for yourself, you get more and more interested in the meditation. It does become more and more of a sport for the mind. John Fuhrman once quoted a passage, I don’t know where he got it, but John is the sport of wise people. John is the sport of sages. It’s what they do to play around. So develop that sense of ease, familiarity, friendship with the breath. Friendship with the qualities of mind that keep you focused. Then, when you get used to having these friends, you look at your other friends and you realize that they weren’t really friends at all. Those who make friends only to cheat them. Of course, your defilements don’t have any intentions like that, but that’s the kind of friends they are. One who’s good only in word. Companion in ruin is fun. It goes down the list of non-friends. This is what our defilements are like. If you think of it this way, you realize that you’ve got some unhealthy relationships going on in the mind. Unfortunately, the Buddha recommends better friends. Again, they’re inside the mind. These kinds of friendships are the factors of the path. It gets easier and easier to break free from those old friendships, the ones that caused you suffering, the ones that gave you only an inconstant happiness. The happiness that was tied up in stress and suffering. The happiness that you had no control over at all. In other words, a happiness marked by the three characteristics. So, be friends with the breath. Be friends with the process of directing your thought, of evaluating the breath. Because even though eventually you have to give up these friendships as well, they’re a lot easier to give up and they take you to a much better place. It’s in that endless string of unsatisfactory places that your old friends would take you.

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