Noble Eight-fold Path, The

April, 2003

We’re here practicing concentration, trying to keep the mind with one object and to make it really one. But we have to remember that the practice of concentration is part of a larger path. There are other elements as well. There are eight factors all together. Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. There’s one sutta where the Buddha says that right concentration is the heart of the path, and the other seven factors are the requisites or the aids to the concentration to make it right. So we have to reflect on those other factors. And we also need practice in those other factors, because the other factors are things that we do. They’re not just things that we think about. They’re actual skills that we try to develop in our lives. Right ways of looking at things, right ways of thinking, planning our actions, and then right ways of carrying through those actions. When you have practice in that, then it’s easier to focus directly on the mind itself. Right view starts with conviction in the principle of karma, that what you do is going to give results. Your intentional actions do make a difference. All too often, we fall prey to the notion that there’s somebody out there who’s got control over things in your life, and that you just might as well give up. But that kind of thinking is destructive, because after a while you start feeling trapped. There’s a natural response to lash back, which doesn’t really help either way when you start out with a conviction. Conviction that what you do, the decisions you make, they do make a difference. Then you work on the quality of your decisions. From that beginning level of right view comes a higher level of right view, that you want to see exactly which actions create stress and suffering and which ones don’t. And you resolve that you’re going to develop the skills needed so that you can act in such ways that don’t create suffering, don’t create stress. Always keep this in mind, because it’s an important principle in the meditation. But at the same time, remember, it’s an important principle in all the things you do in life. You resolve to renounce your attachments to things that are harmful. Resolve not to give in to ill-will for others. Resolve not to do harm. Those are the intentions you should act on, because those are the ones that take you in the right direction. When we talk about renunciation, this of the three factors of right resolve is the one that’s hardest for a lot of people to accept. The idea that you don’t give in to ill-will, everybody can pretty much accept that as a good idea. Whether they can follow through with it or not, that’s a different issue. Everyone accepts that it’s good that you shouldn’t give in to ill-will, that you shouldn’t give in to the desire to harm other people. But when we talk about renunciation, we’re talking about renouncing sensual pleasures. And some people draw the line there, not realizing that our attachment to sensuality is what leaves us open to all kinds of problems, all kinds of suffering. If lust and desire were such good things, why do they lead to so much suffering? Why do they lead to so much harm in the world? We feel that they have to be allowed to express themselves. But what about the part of the mind that is better off not expressing those desires, that feels freer, that feels more unlimited, when it’s not tied down to sensual desires? What about that part of the mind? That’s the part that tends not to be given any room in our society. Day after day after day we’re bombarded. If you have any contact with the media at all, it’s constantly bombarded with desires for this thing, desires for that thing, encouraging you to have more and more desires, because that’s what keeps the economy rolling. Do you want to put your mind into the service of keeping the economy rolling, or do you want to put your mind into the service of gaining freedom for itself? That’s the question you’ve got to ask. One way of getting at an answer is to allow the mind to see the good side of not giving in to sensual desires, see the good side of not being tied to things, not being a slave to your desires. What would that kind of life be like? The mind would have a lot more freedom. When you look at your own behavior and see the things that you do that you feel most regret about, usually it’s because you wanted this or wanted that, or were angry about this or angry about that, and then later regretted what you did. Well, if you start out realizing that those are the factors that cause you to do the things you’re going to regret, well, why give in to those factors? Think about this for a while. Then the question, of course, comes, “Well, where are you going to find pleasure in life if you don’t have these sensual pleasures?” That’s what the meditation is for, is to provide an alternative. So instead of sitting here thinking about the things you’d like to eat or touch or look at or smell or taste or whatever, you can think about the sense of calm that you can develop right here, right now, simply being in the body, being with the breath. The breath comes in. Let it be comfortable. That’s when pleasure has no drawbacks at all. When the breath goes out, let it be pleasurable. Learn how to inhabit your body in a way that you feel comfortable in your own skin. That’s what the practice of concentration is for. It opens your mind to new possibilities, if you’ll allow it to. That’s why you have to start out with the right resolve to think about these issues. How much longer do you want to be a slave to your sensual desires? How much longer do you want to be a slave to your irritation, to your ill will, to your desire to harm? So you think about them and you act about those things. You act on those principles. Try to develop the resolve to free the mind from these things. This is where the middle factors of the path come in, as you learn how to practice it in day-to-day life. Right action. You’re dealing with other people. In the grossest form, it’s not killing, not stealing, not engaging in illicit sex. From that, you can develop to higher and higher levels of refinement. What are the areas that these principles work on? First, don’t do any harm to people’s bodies, to their lives. Second, you don’t do any harm to their possessions. Third, you don’t do any harm to their relationships with one another. Killing, stealing, illicit sex, those are the grossest forms of doing violence to people in these three areas. Once you’ve mastered that, abstaining from those gross forms of violence, then you can work on more and more refined ones, becoming more and more sensitive to how you do violence to other people, to their beings, to their possessions, to their relationships. This teaches you to look at your actions and look at their results. It also shows you the principle of what impact your actions do have on the world around you, and especially the world that you experience. If you change the way you act, you’ll find yourself living in a different world. The parameters change because you’ve changed the intentions that you’ve been acting on. The same goes with the principle of right speech, the principle of right livelihood, the way you speak with people, the way you form words in your mind. This is going to have a big impact on the way you practice concentration. The metal shatter that you pay attention to, the metal shatter that you learn not to pay attention to, the topics that you feed on, the topics that you learn how to let go, these are all important considerations when you’re getting ready to meditate. It’s important that you have practice in day-to-day life. You have to keep watch over your mouth. I’ve said it many times. One of the first lessons that John Fuhring gave to me was that if you want to have control over your mind, the first thing you have to practice is having control over your mouth. The basic principles are no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive chatter, no idle chatter, in particular in the area of idle chatter. It seems the hardest of the forms of wrong speech to avoid, but it’s the most important, because otherwise you’re going to be sitting here for the whole hour with lots of idle chatter going through your mind. Thinking about this, all of a sudden you’ve got this whole space, a whole hour to sit here and no response. So you start thinking about one thing after another, and a lot of it is just furniture stuffing. If you were to take your thoughts out and put them on the floor in front of you, you’d see that there was really nothing much there. Just a lot of random things. First don’t amount to anything. Is that how you’re going to spend the hour? Or would you rather try to get something out of the hour? John Fuhring’s principle was, before you say anything, ask yourself if it’s really necessary. If it’s not necessary, don’t say it. You’ll find that that cuts through a lot of unnecessary speech, a lot of idle chatter. Then, after you get used to not saying those things, after a while you realize, well, there’s no reason to think those things. It makes it easier to let go of the idle chatter inside, because you know there’s not going to be any outlet outside. The same principle applies with right livelihood. The way you make your living is going to have a huge impact on the way you think. The thoughts you allow to come into your mind, the thoughts you don’t allow to come into your mind, the thoughts that have no space at all. If you resolve to make your living only in ways that are honest, you’re going to have to look inside. And you can develop that principle of honesty to whatever level of refinement you want. Then you find yourself putting the mind in a position where, if it’s really one’s happiness, it’s going to have to look inside. Because a lot of the conveniences that make life easy on the outside require sometimes that you work in ways that are not all that honest. Not all that totally pure. But if you can develop a sense of happiness inside that doesn’t depend on things outside, then you find that you can live more lightly in the world. That chant we had just now about the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—when you think about it, all of these things that you need in order to live require that somebody suffers in place. So even when your livelihood is totally honest, the fact that you’ve got a body that’s like this big gaping hole that constantly needs things to cover it up, fill it up, you realize that the more frugally you can live, the more you can find happiness depending on internal factors, then the lighter your life will be on other people. So all these factors keep pointing you in to the mind, into the mind. Then meditation starts right there with the factor of right effort. Realizing that not only what you say and do is going to have an impact on the shape of your world, the shape of your experience, but where those actions and where those words come from. What’s the mind? The qualities in your mind. You’ve got to work on those. So you’re trying to foster skillful qualities in the mind and put aside unskillful ones. In other words, it really does make a difference in your life which thoughts you take up with and which thoughts you allow to fall off to the side. So that when you’re meditating here, you’re not simply just following the flow of whatever comes in your mind. You’re taking charge. You’re giving direction to what you want to focus on, which thoughts are going to take the floor, which thoughts are going to be pushed off to the side. In order to give yourself a grounding, this is what the Foundations of Mindfulness or the Frames of Reference are for. To focus here on the body in and of itself. Just what you’ve got right here, right now. Don’t think of the body in terms of how good-looking it is, or how strong it is, or how healthy it is, or how young or old it is. Just what is the experience of a body right here and now? That’s all you have to worry about. That’s your frame of reference. Then try to stay with that frame of reference. No way you can be friends with it. If you can’t feel friendly towards the present moment, then it’s hard to stay there. If you don’t feel friendly towards the breath, it’s hard to keep with the breath. All too often, as you’re trying to meditate, it seems like the breath is the hardest thing to stay with. It becomes your enemy. “Oh, I’ll just stop for a few minutes.” You realize, if you didn’t have this breath, you wouldn’t be alive. How can you regard it as your enemy? The quality of your breathing is going to have a really big impact on how you experience the rest of the body, because the breath is your primary experience of the body. We often identify with a solid part of the body and think that the breath is something that we pull in and push out, but actually our immediate experience of having a body is through the breathing. The breath is your primary experience, so try to make that as comfortable as possible, because otherwise you can’t relate to the body in any sort of way that’s going to allow you to stay here with a sense of solidity, with a sense of ease, to develop those qualities of ease, rapture, pleasure, and the immediate present. The other factors of the path keep pointing to that as the mind’s true food, the mind’s true dwelling place. At the same time, the other factors of the path have prepared you to keep looking at your actions and looking at the results they have, the results they lead to. They get you used to asking that question, “How can I cause less stress, less suffering, less pain here?” You apply that to the breath, you apply that to the mind in the present moment, and you find that it’s in the context of those questions that all the teachings on insight make sense. You get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing, doing, doing all the time, and your choices, even the simple choice of what you’re going to focus on, how you’re going to focus on it. These are actions, and they have results. They shape your immediate experience of the present. What happens is you make them more refined. When your actions become more refined, what kind of results come about? You keep pursuing that question as far as it can go, and you find it takes you all the way to release. So this practice that we’re following right here, it has a context, both in terms of the theory of the path and in terms of the actual practice of the other factors of the path. They get you to look at the right spot, which are your actions in the present moment, and they get you to look at the results, ask questions about how you can make it more refined, less and less suffering. It’s in this way that the seven first factors of the path create the proper context for what we’re doing right here.

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