Mindfulness & Alertness

November 23, 2003

Right now, there’s only one thing you have to pay attention to, and that’s the breath. You don’t even have to pay attention to the talk. The talk is here to keep focusing you back on the breath. When the breath comes in, know it’s going in. When it comes out, know it’s coming out. Notice how it feels, where you feel the breath, and how comfortable it is. If it’s not comfortable, you can change. Make it longer, make it shorter, deeper, more shallow. Just remember to keep the breath in mind all the time. If you find yourself slipping off, just come back to the breath. Remind yourself again, “Stay here with the breath.” Sometimes you need a meditation word to go along with it. You might use the word bhutto, which means “awake.” It’s where the name or the title of the Buddha came from. Think, “Bhutto,” like that. Then be alert to how the breath feels. Try to put aside as many of your preconceived notions of how you should be feeling the breath or how you should be breathing, and just notice, where do you actually notice that now the breath is coming in, how the breath is going out? What are the sensations that tell you what’s happening? And how do they feel? As you focus on them, do you tend to clamp down on them or try to be with them in a way that doesn’t clamp down? You want to make this a pleasant experience. You want to be on good terms with the breath. Because if you’re going to stay with the breath for a long period of time, you want it to be comfortable. You want it to be an enjoyable experience, an interesting experience. This way you develop two qualities in mind—mindfulness and alertness. The ability to keep something in mind and the ability to watch. And as you’re persistent in these, these qualities get stronger and stronger. They’re very simple. In fact, they’re probably the most simple functions of the mind—to watch something and to keep something in mind. That was part of the Buddha’s genius, to see how very simple things can make a big change if you keep at them. And also noticing that our problems in life many times come down to very simple issues that are so simple we often overlook them. The causes are simple, but as they get worked out into our minds, they get more and more complex, to the point where we feel overcome by the complexity. But if you can trace them back to their sources, you find they come down to very simple things. The fact that we’re not mindful, the fact that we’re not paying attention. Even in areas where you think we should be paying attention, where it makes common sense to pay attention. I’ve been reading recently about some psychologists who have done studies on how poor people are in forecasting what an action will produce in terms of happiness or suffering. In other words, if you choose one job, or another, or choose one house over another, or decide to buy something, or decide not to buy something, people tend to exaggerate the effect that it’s going to have on their basic level of happiness. We’ve all had this experience. You want something and you finally get it, and it turns out that it’s not that big a deal after all. It didn’t provide the satisfaction you thought it would. That’s not such a radical insight. The really radical insight is that people don’t remember this. They keep forgetting. And the next time a similar opportunity comes up, they make the same old, stupid decision over and over again. As a result, in looking for happiness in our lives, we often make the same mistakes over and over and over again. This has come down to a lack of mindfulness and a lack of alertness, and particularly about what we do and the results of our actions. When the Buddha was teaching his son, soon after his son was ordained as a novice, this was the first teaching on being truthful. Then it turned to the issue of what we do, what we say, what we think, and particularly the intention behind our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. He says, “Every time you act, notice what your intention is. And if it looks like an intention to harm, don’t do it. Either harm for yourself or harm for other people. Just don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm coming from it, then go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, watch what actually comes out as a result, because some results of our actions come immediately. You spit in the wind and it comes right back at your face. You put your hand in a fire and it immediately hurts. If you see that the immediate results of your actions are harmful, stop. If they don’t seem harmful, continue with the action. But even when you’re done, you’re not really done. You look at the long-term results of your actions, because some actions don’t show the results until after quite a period of time. You say something today, and you say it again tomorrow. And it doesn’t come back at you until two or three months later or three years later sometimes. If you realize that it was a mistake, resolve not to do it again. It sounds pretty simple, very basic, and that’s why he taught it to his son first thing. And yet very few people live their lives that way. They make a mistake and they either deny it or they forget about it or don’t even notice that it was a mistake. They do things that cause suffering for themselves and other people, and then they do them again, and then they do them again. And it’s because of this that there’s so much suffering in our lives. The Buddha saw that even though the suffering may be very complex and you can tell yourself all up in knots about it, it still comes down to something very simple. You’re not paying attention to what we’re doing. We’re not noticing the results of our actions, and we’re not remembering. We’re not keeping those results in mind. So as we’re meditating, we’re trying to develop these qualities of mindfulness and alertness, both because they help the mind to settle down in the present moment and because they’re useful in approaching this whole problem of why do we cause ourselves unnecessary suffering? The greater stillness you have in your mind, the easier it is to see the suffering that you cause for yourself. Don’t think of the meditation simply as a brief escape from your life or a little resting period. It’s meant to develop qualities that you’re going to take out and use in day-to-day life. In fact, the Pali term for meditation is bhavana, which means developing. You’re developing alertness. You’re developing mindfulness. And then you take these qualities out and you use them to look at your life. Remember that you really do want to be happy. We all do. I doubt there’s anybody who would say sincerely that they don’t want to be happy. And yet, when you look at the way people lead their lives, it’s as if they didn’t really take that issue seriously. But the whole purpose of the Buddhist teachings is to point out that if you really pay attention to what you’re doing, pay attention to the results, and resolve not to repeat your mistakes, you find that it really does make a big difference in your life. You can work through more and more subtle levels of suffering and stress as you pursue this program with more and more subtlety. As your powers of mindfulness get stronger, as your alertness gets sharper, you can begin to discern even very subtle things that you’re doing that are really harmful. And you can also see that it’s possible to stop. We often get tied up in the idea that we identify with certain ways of doing things. This is my way of doing this. This is my way of thinking, my way of speaking, my way of acting. And don’t expect me to change, which also means that don’t expect me to stop suffering. Who suffers, and will you suffer as a result? But if you learn not to identify with these particular patterns of action, just noticing,”This is something I have been doing, but I don’t have to do it,” if it’s a mistake, if it causes suffering, when you take that attitude, you find it is a lot easier to change. And everybody benefits. You benefit, the people around you benefit. All this is so basic and so simple, you think that I wouldn’t have to be saying it, but you look at the way people lead their lives. And this is something that a lot of people tend to overlook. As a psychologist, I’ve discovered that very few people learn from their past mistakes. The psychologists themselves admit that they themselves have trouble learning from past mistakes. One of the issues for mountain climbers is knowing when to turn back. You make up your mind that you’re going to reach a summit, but there comes a certain time that you know, “If this time comes and I haven’t reached the summit, I have to turn back, because otherwise I’m going to be in a lot of trouble.” And then he admits that he keeps forgetting that principle. The time comes and he hasn’t reached the summit yet, and he pushes himself a little bit further and ends up spending the whole night up on the summit without any proper clothing, without a sleeping bag, miserable for the entire night. When dawn finally comes, he resolves to never make that mistake again. A couple of months later, he goes out, climbs another mountain, and makes the same mistake over again. This is very human, but it’s also very pointless. We have to keep reminding ourselves that what you do is important, it has results, and try to remember the results of your actions so you don’t make the same mistakes over again. It’s the simplicity in the Buddhist teachings that means that they’re teachings that everybody can put into practice. You don’t have to be a great philosopher in order to gain awakening, because awakening comes from focusing on these little issues but realizing how important the little, simple issues are. Try to keep things stripped down to their most basic patterns. If you get away from these basic patterns, things get elaborated a lot and you get lost in the elaborations. But if you try to keep things simple, the basic processes of the mind—mindfulness, alertness—develop them. Watch what you do and notice the results of your actions. Resolve not to make that mistake over again. If it’s a mistake, if it isn’t a mistake, take joy in the fact that you’re learning. If you keep these basic principles in the mind, your whole mind can change, your whole life can change, all for the better. If you lose sight of these principles and let things get complicated, it’s very easy for all kinds of self-delusion to get involved in those elaborations. Then nothing much changes. So try to keep things stripped down in your life. Keep the issues very basic. When they’re basic, you can see right through any dishonesty, any self-delusion. Then you see that there’s always the potential for change. There’s always the potential to do the skillful thing, whether it’s in what you do or say or think. That possibility is always there. And when you’ve developed the right tools, you’ll be ready for that possibility, able to make the most of it.

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