Changing Your Mind

November 29, 2003

Try to pay close attention to your breathing. In other words, be right there next to each breath. Don’t be looking at it from far away. In fact, if you can think of yourself as being bathed in the breath, surrounded by the breath on all sides as you breathe in and breathe out, so much the better. It’s by paying careful attention, by paying close attention, that we see things that can change the way our minds look at the whole world, look at this history of science. It’s often one little experiment or one little anomaly that can change a whole scientific paradigm. In the beginning, the small experiment, the small anomaly, is written off as unimportant. But then someone comes along and notices, “This really is important. There’s something in here.” They look into it in more and more detail, and they find that it opens up a whole new perspective, a whole new way of looking at things. This is the only way that scientific paradigms can be overthrown, old ones can be overthrown, and new ones can be established. It’s the same with our minds. We have certain old, habitual ways of looking at things. No matter how much someone may explain to you the major teachings of the Dhamma, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Characteristics, the Five Khandas, it doesn’t really seep in until you start looking at your mind in detail, looking at your breath in detail, and you start noticing the little anomaly or anomalies, the things that don’t quite fit in with the way you’ve normally been behaving, the way you’ve normally been reading things in your mind, reading things in your body. Little details have always been there, but you tend to write them off as unimportant. As a result, nothing gets changed. If you really want to change the mind—and the change we’re working on here is a change in how the mind can learn to stop creating suffering for itself, find a way of thinking, find a way of speaking, find a way of acting that doesn’t keep piling more and more suffering all the time on top of us and on top of the people around us—that’s the kind of change we’re looking for. So it requires focusing on the details, paying close attention to what happens as you focus on the breath. Both the details of the breath and the details of focusing. What does it mean to focus the mind? What does it mean to stay with one object? You can think about it, you can hear the talks about it, but really understand the process. You have to try to develop that quality of continual awareness, continual mindfulness in the mind, right here in the present moment. And it means step by step by step, each breath, each mental moment. Paying close attention, looking at the details. In the course of focusing on the details, qualities of mindfulness, qualities of alertness get strengthened. Your concentration gets more and more established. When the concentration is established in the details like this and nothing gets sloughed over, then discernment has its chance to make real changes. Sometimes it’s a little fleeting, fleeting things that happen in the mind, or little fleeting things that happen in the breath that are going to make a difference. So try to pay careful attention. A while back I was leading a retreat talking about focusing on being skillful. In other words, noticing what you do, what the results are of what you do, and whether or not those results are satisfactory. You start by focusing on the breath like this. When you focus on the breath in a certain way, you find that you see the breath in a certain way. It influences the way you see the breath, it influences the way the breath runs in the body. And then you try to experiment, change your focus a little bit and see what that does to the breath. Or you can focus your efforts on dealing with the breath itself, making it a little bit longer, allowing it to be a little bit shorter, learning how to breathe in such a way that you’re squeezing off the energy in any part of the body. Sometimes we have a preconceived notion that an in-breath should have a certain length and a certain finality to it to clearly mark the distinction between the in-breath and the out-breath. In doing so, we tend to squeeze off the breath energy in different parts of the body. We don’t have to do that. Allow the in-breath to flow naturally into the out-breath and then the out-breath back into the in-breath with as little clear demarcation between the two. And you find that that changes how you perceive the breath and how the breath runs in the body. And as you do this, you get a greater and greater sense of the principle of cause and effect right here in the present moment. While I was presenting this teaching in that retreat, there was someone there who really objected to it. They said, “Why this focus on minutia? Aren’t we supposed to open up to the deathless? You focus on all these little details, all this piccayune stuff, and you’re blinding yourself to the larger deathless that’s all around you. Well, look around you. Where do you see the deathless?” It’s not out there in a sense of space or in a sense of willed openness. It’s actually in learning to understand the process of cause and effect in your mind. If you don’t understand that process, then you never see what isn’t involved in cause and effect. You’re telling yourself, “Oh, I’m inclining the mind to the deathless,” but that’s just a preconceived notion. It might be a nice large idea or a sense of space. But there’s a lot of mental cause and effect going on in that “inclining the mind to the deathless,” which, if you’re not careful, you miss. You slap a label on some type of experience and say, “Oh, that’s the deathless.” Well, maybe it’s just a feeling or a perception, a subtle level of any of that. The exit is right here in noticing what you’re doing right now, your intention in the present moment, getting to see more and more subtle levels of intention so you’re not fooled by them. Then, as your understanding of the process of intention gets more and more precise, that’s where things open up. When you finally realize, “Yes, there is this moment of no intention whatsoever,” you can’t see that unless you’ve learned to be very precise in how you observe things. You can look at the entire process of the path, and it’s all a process of learning to be observant. Take the precepts, for example. When you make up your mind that you’re going to hold to a particular precept, you promise yourself you’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal, you’re not going to lie, you’re not going to engage in illicit sex, you’re not going to take intoxicants. Then you take that principle and you apply it to your life, and you begin to see certain habits you have that go against the precept. Say, against the precept on lying, the precept says, “Absolutely no lies, nothing that you know to be false. You don’t say that.” Then you come up against the question, “What about white lies? What about times when you really don’t want to reveal the entire truth to somebody because it might hurt their feelings or it might cause trouble one way or another? What do you do then?” And you suddenly realize that these little decisions you make from day to day have large moral consequences, moral implications that you might have missed otherwise. It’s only when you set up the precept as a promise to yourself that you start seeing these things. Otherwise, they don’t run against anything, and when they don’t run against anything, you just kind of go with the flow. The purpose of the precept is for you to examine your intentions. If you don’t want to totally reveal the truth, well, why? You might say that it’s for the other person’s own good. Well, is it really? Look into it. This requires a lot of honesty and a lot of very clear perception. Sometimes you will find that, yes, it would be better not to answer a particular question and not to reveal certain facts. But you have to give rise to greed, anger, and delusion in the person you’re talking to. How do you deal with that so that you still don’t tell a lie? That develops your ingenuity. In this way, you’re exercising your powers of perception, your powers of alertness, and the power of your ingenuity simply in dealing with the issues of what you see. Each of the precepts sets up barriers like this for you to keep running against. In the past, you would do what seemed convenient, or you could rationalize it to yourself that this is probably okay. But when you have a precept that you set up as a promise to yourself, if you break your own promises to yourself, how can anybody trust you? You can’t trust yourself. That’s scary. In fact, one of the biggest fears in life is that you can’t totally trust yourself to do the right thing in all circumstances, because you’re operating either under desire, or aversion, or delusion, or fear—things you may have never noticed in yourself before, and suddenly you run into them face to face. This is a good lesson. How are you going to learn to overcome those attitudes? So you can learn to trust yourself more and more. In this way, you see that the process of seeing things clearly is not simply a question of knowledge. It’s also a question of being true to yourself, of being honest to yourself. That’s what makes tectonic shifts in the mind, changes the balance of power, changes your priorities. So the practice we have here is one of wanting to make change, and then focusing on the little details that will make that change possible. You can read the books on the Buddhist teachings, and intellectually they make sense, and you try to fit that paradigm into your mind. And in your more abstract moments, it makes sense. It seems to fit into your mind. But then you have to look, does it actually apply to your actions? Does it apply to your words? How does it apply to your thoughts, the way you think in day-to-day life? Many times you find that the abstract understanding just gets thrown out. But when you start applying it to the little issues in life, the day-to-day decisions, you begin to see things in the mind that you didn’t see before. You also see possibilities. You see unskillful things in the mind, but you also see possibilities for skillful approaches, skillful responses, that you didn’t see before. Your promise to yourself to follow the path is what forces those new opportunities to appear. And your willingness to look very, very carefully at things is what allows for those changes. So when you’ve been practicing the precepts and you come to the meditation, you find that the talents you’ve developed, the abilities you’ve developed in the precepts, help you to be more perceptive as you’re meditating. You’re more perceptive in bringing the mind to stillness, more perceptive in beginning to dig out where the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself, where it’s been identifying with states of mind that are blatantly unskillful and then ones that are more subtly unskillful. It’s when you look for the details that you really see. And it’s only when you see that real changes can be made. Certain habits can be dropped for good. Someone once complained, “How can a habit be dropped for good? After all, aren’t things inconstant? Something goes, well, it comes back. It comes back again.” But there are certain acts of insight, certain moments of discernment in the mind, where you really cut through the possibility that you would ever follow a particular unskillful path ever again. It’s like cutting off your arm. No matter how much you try to stitch it back on, it’s never quite stitched back the way it originally was. There comes a point where certain fetters in the mind really are cut. Totally, for good. And you wouldn’t want to stitch them back on anyhow, because you see how much more freedom the mind has when that particular fetter is cut. Well, it’s not cut in the abstract. It’s cut in catching the mind in the midst of doing something unskillful and realizing you don’t have to do that. You’ve been allowing yourself to do it. You’ve been playing along with that. But now you see clearly how and why you did it and how and why you don’t have to. Because the mind has opened up to other possibilities that give you an entirely new perspective. So don’t overlook the details. They can make radical changes in the mind, total changes in the mind, if you pay close attention.

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