Unskillful Habits

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Insight is something that can’t be willed, but the mind can be primed so that it does give rise to insight. That’s what the meditation is. We’re priming the mind so it’s able to see things, able to see particularly the way it’s creating stress and suffering for itself and doesn’t have to, catching yourself in the act and then being able to stop, to let go. It’s like knowing that something very important is going to be happening at a particular intersection. You may not be able to time it or know exactly what it’s going to be, but you can position yourself at the intersection and learn how to watch carefully so that you see it when it happens. So as we’re meditating, we’re putting ourselves in the position where we’re positioning ourselves on right here at the breath. As you stay here, you get to see a lot of things going on in the mind, a lot of things going on in the body. And yet, while you’re with both the mind and the body, you’re able to step back from both a bit. The sense of the mind as you get grounded in the breath, get out of your head, you can see things, conversations that go on in the mind. And instead of jumping in and taking one role or the other, as we often do, you’re able to step back. And same with the body. You’re able to watch the body, but because you have the breath as your anchor and as your tool for dealing with things that are coming up in the body, you don’t feel threatened, not necessarily directly involved in every pain, every problem that arises in the body. You can step back and watch. Being in the right position is not enough. You also have to learn how to look. And sometimes learning how to look means changing your old habits. And this is where some of the programming of the meditation comes in. Priming yourself to look for certain things, learning to ask the right questions, particularly when it comes to unskillful mental states. They’re old habits. Anger, irritation, that’s a habit. Lust, greed, desire, those are habits as well. And we follow along with them. They’re old ruts. They seem to be old friends, but they’re old ruts. The mind unthinkingly follows from one step to the next, to the next, thinking that they’re all necessary. But it just happens to be a pattern that we’ve learned to follow. And part of learning to get out of those habits is to create new habits. And it’s in the creating of the new habits that we learn to see. It’s not simply an exercise in behavioralist psychology, forcing someone into a new pattern of behavior and thinking they should simply replace one with another. And that’s the end of the problem. But it’s in going against the old ruts that you start seeing things. You resist certain connections. In other words, you come across an incident that you don’t like, but instead of going immediately to the not-liking, you go to the observer. Or you train yourself to look for the ways in which you can endure whatever it is that’s coming up. And you see that potential. It’s there, simply you didn’t develop it before. The same with lust. A lot of lust has to do with visualization. Often we rarely see the object of our lust. Instead, we see our ideas about what would excite lust, because we like the lust. And if the object, the person that we’re lusting for, doesn’t have all the right features, well, we begin to sketch a little here and add a little there and take a little bit away. And it’s all in our imagination. So in dealing with lust, we have to learn how to visualize in a new way. This is what the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body is all about. Of course, a lot of our delusions about the human body start from our own delusions about our own body. That’s why we have to start with our own body in this, taking our own bodies apart. And as the Buddha once pointed out, it’s our sense of attraction to our own bodies that then spreads out and makes us attracted to the opposite sex. So this is where we start. Look at how you visualize your own body, and then look at how it actually looks. And then start visualizing the inside, section by section, piece by piece. See what you got here. Make that a habitual practice. Every day, do it at least once, twice, three times. Actually, you don’t have to count the times. Just keep doing it for a while. So it becomes second nature. As soon as the mind starts cooking up an image that would get you attracted, you say, “Well, there’s this other side as well.” Having a basis in the breath enables you to step back so you can catch yourself doing this. And then you’ve got the antidote right there. What this does is it begins to put you in a position where you can gain some real insight into the fact that it’s not the object out there that’s got you lusting. There’s some drive in the mind, as John Lee used to say. This is one of the fermentations, the fermentation of sensuality. Where does it come from? It ferments out of the mind, bubbles up in the mind. You go out looking for something to lust after. And sometimes it fits in line with our pictures, and sometimes it doesn’t. But look at the role that those pictures play. And you can invent other pictures as well to get in the way. If taking apart the body in the present moment is enough, you can think 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years down the line to the point where it’s dead, decomposing. You cremate it. Then put it back together again. See what that does to your attitude toward the body. John Fung, many times when he would have students who would start getting images of their bodies in their meditation, that’s what he’d have them do. Go through five or ten year increments, and finally the body dies. Let it sit around for a couple of days, see what it looks like. Then cremate it, so it’s nothing but dust. And that awareness, it’s aware of the dust. Then you put it back together again, realizing what you’ve got here is a fabrication, something made out of physical elements, something you have moved into and assumed a lot of things about how much it’s going to cooperate, how much it’s going to do this for you, and how much it’s going to do that for you, where it hasn’t made any agreements at all. All the suppositions are on the side of your desires, and it’s pointing you back to the mind. That’s what the purpose of all these exercises are for. The same with irritation, the same with anger. We’ve often found in the past that we get our way by being angry. But when we stop and look at it, we’re also creating a lot of karma for ourselves, a lot of bad karma. You have to stop and think for a while. Anger is not the positive thing. We think it is. We sometimes say, “Injustice wouldn’t be fought without anger.” Well, it can be fought without anger. In fact, it’s most effectively fought without anger. And if we’ve been the victims of injustice, we don’t like to think that we’ve somehow been complicit in it. It seems that’s what the four Noble Truths are pointing at, the kind of suffering we create for ourselves. That’s the issue, as if the suffering outside coming from outside was not an issue. It is an issue. But because we pile on our own suffering, it makes it harder, it makes it more and more difficult for us to deal properly with the outside stuff. So straightening out our own minds is not a question of laying the blame on us, but saying, “If we can’t take care of this issue inside, we’re not going to be able to take care of issues outside. So this has to come first.” And then you look at what happens through anger. There’s a great passage where the Buddha says, “When a person is angry, he does things and says things and thinks things that his enemy would be pleased to see happen.” You look ugly, you drive away your friends, you harm your own well-being. Black seems white, white seems black. Everything gets mixed up. What you think you’re doing is going to put you in a good position, but it actually puts you in a bad position, and vice versa. You destroy your good reputation. All these things are things that an enemy would find pleasing. This is the Buddha’s first line of defense against anger. He doesn’t teach you to love your enemy. At that point, he says, “Do you really want to please your enemy by acting in this way?” It brings you up short. Then he has you step back and just look at the situation in terms of the laws of karma and action. “Do you really want to do something unskillful right now? Can you see clearly right now as anger clouds your vision?” The problem is that oftentimes it seems so clear that this is what should be said, this is what should be done. That’s because you’ve narrowed your attention. Your mind has been tunneled. It can see only one thing, which seems the obvious thing to be done, the obvious thing to be said. That’s because you’ve blocked off all your sense of shame, all your sense of concern for the results of your actions. So as you step back and look for a while, look in terms of the teaching on karma, and look at the fact that you’re a human being, this is what the world is like. There are going to be people who do things and say things that are displeasing to you, displeasing to people you love or pleasing to people you hate. This is the nature of life. The world has got to be this way. If you let that put you into an unskillful mental state, you’re at a disadvantage. So again, having the breath to fall back on helps in a lot of ways. One, it helps you breathe through a lot of the tension in the body that would make you want to get the anger out of your system or get that feeling of confinement, that feeling of discomfort out of your system. That puts you in a position where you can watch. Is this anger? Does it really give you a realistic picture of what is going on? Does it give you a realistic picture of what should be done? Having the breath there helps you step back. A lot of this reflection, of course, depends on having practiced beforehand. This is why the Buddha has us reflect on, in the case of lust, the thirty-two parts of the body regularly. In the case of anger, he says, think about the principle of karma. It’s one of those five subjects for frequent recollection. “The owner of my actions, heir to my actions,” all the way down the line. All living beings are the same way. So when the unskillful mental state comes, you’ve got these new habits, these new habitual ways of thinking to counter them. Having the breath as your foundation puts you in a position where you can counter them. Having practiced learning the new habits, that means you’ve got a tool ready to use. So don’t wait until the anger comes or wait until the lust comes before you do these kinds of contemplations. Get into practice. You don’t have to wait until your concentration is really, really good before you can do this. It’s good to practice in advance. It’s like going down to the gym. You exercise, and bit by bit by bit you get stronger. If you’ve got work that needs to be done, you use the body you’ve got. You don’t wait until you’re really, really strong and then do work. There’s always work to be done. It’s just that you take the strength you’ve got and you put it to use. And of course, by putting it to use, you get better. You get stronger. Those good habits become the ruts in your mind. At the same time, as the ruts start crisscrossing each other, they put you in different positions where you can see things a lot more clearly. Instead of just going with the flow, you create new branch canals. It gives you new perspectives, new points of view. And it’s in this way that these programming practices—reflecting on karma, reflecting on thirty-two parts of the body, all the various reflections that we have—even though they’re willed, they put you in the right position. They give you the questions to ask. You start questioning your old habits. Does it really have to be that way? Is that really the best way to act? Could you act in a better way? Don’t think of this as a process of self-improvement. Think of it as action improvement, word improvement, thinking improvement. Get your image of self out of the way. Just look directly at what you’re doing. See it for what it is. See it for the results that come. You’ll see that as you train the mind in these new habits, even though it doesn’t cut anger at the root, it doesn’t cut lust at the root, at least it puts you in a position where you will be able to do that. At the very least, it shows you that there are alternative ways of dealing with the world. It lifts you up out of your old habits and gives you new habits that also give you a new perspective. This, combined with the concept of concentration practice, gets you asking questions. The whole point of the practice is to have you asking questions. If everything were answered, all the answers were laid out, this wouldn’t be a challenging practice. All you’d have to do is memorize things. So many people go through life like that, wanting their religion to teach them that they don’t have to think. It gives them all the answers, makes everything all very clear, one-dimensional. But that’s not the type of teaching that makes you grow. The whole point of the Buddhist teachings is to get you to ask questions. It gives you the tools with which you can find the answers. It’s only in that way that they can really engage all of you as a human being and provoke the kind of insights that really go deep, that really do make a difference, that ultimately cut through the basic misunderstanding that underlies lust, that underlies anger, and all the other and scaleful stakes.

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