Focus on the Doing

March 17, 2004

Sometimes, we think of meditation as a means of self-improvement. But that kind of thinking muddies the water. What’s the self that needs to be improved? Who’s the self that’s going to do the improving? And what’s wrong with the self that it needs to be improved? You can clutter up your mind with all kinds of answers to those questions and actually get in the way of the meditation. If you look at the Buddhist teachings, they focus very little on what people are and a great deal on what they do. In fact, the worth of a person lies not in his birth or his background or his looks, his wealth, any of the things that society usually looks at. The worth of a person lies in his or her actions, what you do, how thoughtful and considerate you are in what you do, how careful and skillful you are in what you do. That’s important. As he pointed out, if you focus on your actions in this way, take them to the ultimate level of skillfulness, you open to the deathless. As for the question of who opens to the deathless, don’t ask. The actual opening to the deathless in itself is worth all the other issues of life, putting them all aside. So you can see this one thing, see its true worth. In the meantime, the path to getting there is a good path. You focus on doing the skillful thing, saying the skillful thing, thinking the skillful thing, and your life is bound to become a better life. A side effect may be that you become a better person, but that’s not the focus. The focus is on the acting. All the Buddhist teachings point right there on the doing and the results of the doing, the results being the experience of pleasure or pain, relative levels of happiness, relative levels of pain. The doing is judged as skillful, as to how much you’re able to avoid harm and pain, how much you’re able to avoid acting on destructive emotions. So as you’re meditating, try to focus on the doing as much as possible, and let the whole question of who you are put that aside. Now, to focus on the doing, you have to stay here in the present moment, because that’s where all these decisions are being made. It doesn’t mean that you forget the past or you don’t anticipate the future, but your emphasis is on how you take information about the past, information about the future, and how you process it here in the present moment. That requires two things. One, it requires that you feel at home here in the present moment. The other is that you’re very clear about what’s going on. This is why we work on the breath. As you work with the breath, you’re getting a sense of what rhythm of breathing feels good, what quality of breath energy in the body feels good. You’re learning to monitor the whole issue of your breath energy here, right here, right now. That helps make you feel at home. Notice when you’re breathing out too long, kind of squeezing the energy out of the body. If that’s your particular problem, sometimes the other problem is that you’re breathing out too short. Notice not only the in-and-outness of the breathing, but also the quality of the breath energy that surrounds the body. This is important because when you’re out in your daily activities, often it’s difficult to keep focused on whether the breath is coming in or going out, but you can very easily keep focused on the quality of the breath energy that surrounds the body, permeates the body, as you get closer to the breath. Let yourself be sensitive to the fact that your experience of the body is through the breath. So you focus on the medium, which is the breath. You begin to realize that particular sensations of tightness or tension or heaviness that you took for granted as being part of having a solid body actually turn into something else when you look at them as breath energy. You realize, “Oh, that’s a blockage. That’s stagnant breath energy.” You learn to work through it. This makes your experience of the present moment a lot more livable, a lot more pleasant. And the experience of shifting your perception like this also makes you wonder what other perceptions might well be shifted. You see the power of the mind in shaping your experience. So you turn your attention more and more there to see clearly what’s going on in the mind. Once the breath gets still, the breath energy feels full, refreshing in the body. It’s a lot easier to see the movements of the mind and to see what motivates them. Some of the movements are just that—movements, pretty random, have nothing to do with your present karma. Thoughts come, thoughts go, under the influence of what you’ve done in the past. That’s an important distinction. Many times thoughts come into the mind and we suddenly feel we have to take responsibility for them. They reflect on what kind of person we are. But if you look at them as reflections, not of what you are, but what you’ve done in the past, it’s pretty easy to see where a lot of these thoughts come from. And you don’t have to get involved with them. Sometimes simply watching them come, watching them go, is enough to be done with them. Other times you actually do have to get involved with them because they’re recurring. And there’s part of you that’s really attracted to getting involved with them. So you have to understand that involvement, counteract that involvement. But again, it comes down to an issue of the doing, exactly which movements of the mind are just vagrant movements and which ones are actually doing movements, karmic movements, that you’re responsible for here, right now. That kind of knowledge can come only with time. In other words, spend a lot of time here in the present moment to really get to know it. And then you can start dealing more effectively with what’s coming into the mind and what decisions are coming out of the process. This is why the clarity that comes from stilling the mind is very important. Because these things that are moving around in the mind are like currents. If you go along with the current of the river, it’s hard to tell how fast you’re going. There are just lots of currents there in the water. But if you stand still in the water, then you can see clearly how fast a particular current is going. And you also can get a sense of where it’s going to take you. If you go with the current, you have a sensation of the banks of the river flowing past you. But if you stand still, you see it’s actually the currents that are doing the moving. So it’s by being still that you understand these movements of the mind and can deal with them a lot more effectively. So the breath meditation serves two purposes. One, to give you a sense of being at ease. Secondly, to give you the clarity so you can see exactly what kind of decisions are being made right now. It’s this element of choice, intention, the decisions that are being made. That’s what determines how the practice is going to go. As you get more and more skilled at making those choices, that’s a sign the practice is moving in the right direction. Opening up to the Deathless is really an insight into what it means to act, how the mind goes about acting. Taking that process apart by observing it and adjusting it here, adjusting it there, dropping anything that you find is stressful. Taking it apart bit by bit by bit until there’s nothing left there to take apart. That’s when things open up. So it doesn’t matter that you have a correct notion of who you are. It’s simply that you’re willing to question what is being done here that’s causing suffering. If you see something that’s being done that’s causing suffering, you drop it. So it’s looking into the nature of action rather than the nature of what you are. That’s what’s going to open things up in the mind. As the Buddha said, that’s where the true happiness lies. That’s what happens also, that the path of the practice does make you a better person. You’re taught to be generous. You’re taught to be virtuous. It makes it a lot easier for other people to be around you, for you to be around them. You become more trustworthy, more reliable, more down-to-earth. But these aspects of the path are not there simply to make you a better person. They’re there to help you see things more clearly. You see your mind a lot more clearly when you’re generous than you do when you’re not. You see things more clearly when you follow the precepts than you do when you don’t. They’re there to teach you things about the mind, these practices. They’re there to teach you about the nature of human action and the nature of the happiness that can come from human action. So think in those terms. And when you do, you find that it clears up a lot of unnecessary issues, a lot of unnecessary baggage and burdens. It focuses right exactly where you can make a difference in your life for the better. So keep the practice simple. Not necessarily easy, but keep it simple. We’re not doing this in a simplistic way, but simply cutting away issues that really are irrelevant. Focusing on the Ramacandra, we have the implications of this potential we have to make choices and to act. We learn how to use this potential in such a way that it’s not causing harm for ourselves, not causing harm for others. It’s probably one of the scariest things in life. A lot of our suffering is caused by ourselves, by our own actions. You’d think that we would love ourselves. You’d think that we would care about our happiness. Yet when you look at the way people live their lives, it’s as if they couldn’t care less. Somehow they think they have other, more important things to worry about. Yet if that’s their attitude, they’re left with nothing, struggling after things that will then disappoint them. But you work on developing a skill. That’s something that never leaves you and that doesn’t disappoint. So as you go through life, try to keep things basic. You’re here on earth. You’re in the present moment. You know how to be at home in the present moment. You know how to be clear about the present moment, what’s going on. Learn how to gauge your intentions. Learn from your past mistakes. They’re very simple things to do, but it’s simply the issue of being consistent. That makes all the difference.

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