Main Skill, The

August 24, 2004

Take stock of what you’ve got right here. It’s not much. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing, and you’ve got the mind that’s thinking and aware. What are you going to do with what you’ve got? That’s an important question, because as you go through life, this is pretty much what you’ve got. All you have is what you’ve got right here, right now. In particular, when you’re facing death, this is all you’ll have. There will come a point where nobody can do anything else for you. If you’re in the hospital, the doctors will have to throw up their hands and say, “Sorry, that’s it. As far as we can take you.” And at that point, all you have will be the skills that you’ve perfected. One, an important skill, is not losing your composure in the face of whatever comes up. Good things come, bad things come. At that point, a lot of bad things will be coming. It’s important that you not get swallowed up in those bad things, and instead that you realize that you’ve got a handle on them. You have skills to use to deal with those things. And the only way you have skills at that point is by developing them now. By making use of what you’ve got right here, your awareness of the body, your awareness of the breath. In particular, what you’ll need at that point is a skill for allowing your awareness to separate out from the body, not to be possessive of it, not to hold on to it, and to have a very clear sense of being something separate. So you divide out not only from the body, but also from whatever pains there are in the body. Unskillful thoughts come flowing through the mind. You want to have a sense that the basic awareness here is something separate from its objects, so it doesn’t have to be colored by them. So that’s the skill we’re working on here. Paradoxically, the way to get there is by immersing your awareness first in the body, immersing it in the breath. The term they have in Pali is kaya-katha-siddhi, mindfulness immersed in the body. And it is that quality of immersion that we’re working on here. You want to be with the breathing and the whole body. Start out at one point, and you can either spread immediately from one point to the whole body, or you can work in the body, work through it, section by section by section, whichever you find more congenial. But you start with your basic awareness of the breath coming in, going out, and get really sensitive to that. Again, it’s a matter of looking at what you’ve got, taking stock of what you’ve got, noticing where you feel the breath, what you have to do in order to breathe in, breathe out, what you don’t have to do, what the body does on its own, and what feels best. And from there, the next step in the text is to work on being aware of the whole body, as you breathe out, as your awareness fills the body here in the present moment. If you can keep it full here in the present moment, then you find it a lot easier not to get knocked off by your thoughts. And you find that that sense you have of, say, being centered in your head or centered in a particular part of the body, begins to dissolve away. Oftentimes we think of ourselves, say, up in the head, and if you say, “Be aware of your foot,” then it’s somehow the head being aware of the foot. But actually, there’s already a sense of awareness in the foot, in the leg, in the arm, on either side of the body. And you want to get in touch with that background awareness that’s already there, because that’s the awareness that’s able to separate out. So try to be down in the body as much as possible. Again, this is a question of taking stock of what you’ve got right here, right now. The Buddha’s not asking you to create a lot of things that you don’t already have. Often the meditation deals more in letting go of things and settling down into what’s left. You let go of distraction, as he said. You let go of unskillful mental states. You let go of sensual desires. You seclude yourself from that. In other words, you separate yourself out. And just that sense of separation is enough to allow the mind to settle down and have at least some sense of respite, some sense of release, settling down into what you’ve already got. And then you explore what you’ve got at that point and look for where there’s still some stress, still some discomfort. It’s important, though, that you get really settled for a moment. Or speak before you get involved in that kind of questioning. Otherwise, you destroy the concentration and things become very tense. Allow yourself to be with the body, breathing in, breathing out. And if it feels dumb, just allow yourself to be dumb for a while. If you haven’t figured it out yet, well, stay right here and watch. It doesn’t require a lot of elaborate thinking. In fact, it involves letting go of the elaborate thinking and being willing to look at things at a very basic level. Think about the great scientific revolutions. It’s not just people thinking about very abstract and very elaborate things. They just turn around and question basic assumptions and notice what’s really obvious, like the story of the emperor’s new clothes. We like to think we’re smart, we can deal with all sorts of abstractions, but it’s the person who questions the basic assumptions underlying these things. Simple assumptions. That’s the person who creates revolutions in our understanding of the world. The same thing happens in our own body. We create a revolution in the mind by questioning very basic things, what you’ve got right here, right now. And you can learn to ask the right questions only when you sit here for a while and really watch what you’ve got, until a point comes when you begin to realize that what’s actually here and what you thought you had here are two very different things. Then you ask yourself, “Which is right, your new perceptions or your old perceptions?” Sometimes the new perceptions can be skewed, so you have to watch out. But if you watch long enough, you’ll be in a position where you can really make the right decision—what to let go of, what to hold on to. So it’s a question of peeling away. Peeling away what you’ve got right here, to see on more and more basic levels what you’ve got right here. Because the points where you really need a solid foundation, where you really need your mind to be in good shape for dealing with difficult issues, are the points where you don’t have much, where you’re cornered and your resources are trimmed down. So if you focus on developing your resources in areas that nobody can take away, then you are ready for any situation. Jon Munn once made the point that nobody can take your virtues away from you. As he said, if it could be separated out from the mind, there’d probably be people out there stealing your virtues. Nobody can steal your virtues. Same with your concentration, the same with your discernment. Nobody can take that away. Sometimes you surrender these things to other people or to their influence, but you don’t have to. So if you focus on building your strengths on what’s already there, then you’re in a really good position for whatever happens. Aging can come, illness can come, death can come. If you develop good qualities of the mind in this way, you’ll find that they can’t take away anything that’s really of value. They can’t take away your tools. So this opportunity we have to sit back and drop all the distractions of ordinary life and focus on just what we’ve got when we’re sitting out there alone under the trees. What have you got there? It may not seem like much, but the Buddha pointed out that there’s a lot of potential here. Even your desires have their potential. Your desire not to suffer, your desire not to be harmful either to yourself or to other people, that’s a useful desire. There will come the day when you let go of desires, but as long as you’ve got skillful desires, you make use of them. As long as you’ve got breath, make use of the breath. As long as you’ve got the body, make use of the body. That’s a way of getting in touch with that level of awareness that’s not touched by anything. That can’t be threatened by anything. So in that case, no matter what comes, you’re safe. If you don’t develop any other skills in your life, make sure at least that you’ve got this one down.

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