Doing the Practice

October 16, 2004

First, get your body in position, left leg on top of the right, hands in your lap, right leg on top of the left, hands in your lap, right hand on top of your left. Sit up straight, comfortably straight. Face forward and close your eyes. It’s relatively simple. The hard part is staying in position. This applies even more to the mind. If you say, “Focus on the breath,” you can immediately do it. The issue is staying with the breath, staying with the present moment. That requires practice. So you need to know how to encourage yourself to stay, as well as the various techniques for staying. The encouragement comes from the chanting we did just now. As the chant on Goodwill says, we all want happiness, and not just for ourselves. Ideally, we’d like to have happiness for everyone. But then you look at human life. That was the other chant. We’re all subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. We’re all subject to separation. And a happiness that’s based on things that age, grow, ill, die, and get separated, is a very precarious business. We’re looking for something that’s more solidly grounded, more reliable, more dependable. That’s where that fifth reflection comes in. All living beings are the owners of their actions. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that we fall heir. It’s in our actions that hope lies for true happiness. If we just had those first four reflections, it’d be pretty depressing. But we have the potential to find true happiness. Through our actions, and particularly the actions of the mind, because it’s the mind that lies behind what we say and what we think and what we do. So we have to train the mind so that it’s skilled in giving the orders, so that it can see what’s the skillful action in any particular set of circumstances and follow through with that. That requires mindfulness, it requires alertness. It requires discernment, persistence, all of which are qualities we can train in, we can develop in the mind. Staying focused on the breath, staying with the body in the present moment, this is a good way of developing these qualities. To begin with, the very basic breath is something you always have as long as you’re alive. The body is something that’s already there. You don’t have to go out and buy your meditation object or borrow one. You’ve got it right here. And it doesn’t require a great deal of book learning or theorizing to understand what we’re doing. We’re actually to do the practice here. You learn a lot in the course of doing the practice. And although it’s good to have background, the real understanding that comes is from actually doing it. So you stay focused on the breath as it comes in, you stay with it as it comes out, and in the process of staying with the breath, you develop a lot of good qualities. One, mindfulness is needed just to keep reminding yourself, “This is where you’re going to stay right now,” because the mind can shift its frame of reference very quickly. You have to keep reminding yourself, “Stay here, just with the breath.” Don’t bring off to what you’re going to do tomorrow what you did yesterday. The mind may wander off, but you don’t have to follow it. See, the thought is one thing, but your awareness of the breath is still there. The fact that there is a thought in the mind doesn’t destroy the breath. It may create a little world in which, if you enter into that world, it helps to blot out a lot of your awareness of the body. But just keep reminding yourself, “Come back to that basic awareness. It’s right here.” That’s mindfulness. Alertness actually watches what’s happening. When the breath is coming in, you know it’s coming in. When it goes out, you know it’s going out. When it’s comfortable or not, you know that, too. And if it’s not comfortable, you can change. You can vary the rhythm of the breathing. You can vary the depth. Make it longer. Make it longer or shorter, heavier or lighter. Experiment to see what works. This element of experimentation is extremely important, because you have to admit, as you start out, that you don’t really know all that much about your own mind or what’s going to happen if you stay with the breath. You don’t want to anticipate too much. You say, “Well, this is going to have to work. That’s going to have to work.” You stay with the basic sensation of the breathing and watch what happens. And then if you begin to notice, “Well, this doesn’t feel very comfortable,” you can change it. Think of the breath coming in and out the whole body. Because when you actually look at the experience of breathing, it’s hard to draw a line between the sensation of breathing and the rest of the energy flow in the body. And it’s best not to try to draw a line between those, because if you start drawing lines, you create blockages. So think of the energy flowing through the whole nervous system, all the blood vessels throughout the body. If you notice any tension or tightness in any part of the body, allow it to relax. Think of things gradually opening up. So the whole body breathes in easily and breathes out easily. And as for what rhythm will feel best or how deep it should be, that’s something you find out on your own. Remember, this is what meditation is. It’s a process of finding out. You’re not putting the mind into a machine, just hoping it’ll come out okay at the other end of the machine. It’s a process of developing sensitivity, which means that you observe and then you observe again. You don’t want to jump to conclusions. If you do have an observation, well, put it to the test. This is how discernment is developed. Watching the process of causing the mind to have an effect right here in the mind. Because when you learn to be more observant like this, you start seeing more things. You start understanding the patterns of the mind, how things like greed, anger, and delusion get started, how they grow, how they take over, how they can be dropped. What happens if you don’t drop them? What happens if you do? You may have some general ideas about this, but if you want to see things really clearly so that these things don’t overcome you, you want to stop and watch very carefully. This is why concentration is such an important part of developing the mind. Staying focused, watching things over time. Because most of our understanding about the mind is like connect the dots. We have a little dot of knowledge here, a little something we’ve observed over there, and then we connect the dots. What do we connect it with? We connect it with our ignorance. “This must be like that. That must be like this.” A lot of times, if you actually saw how the dots were connected, they would be a duck, but we turn them into a frog. They could be an airplane, but we turn them into a bird. We turn them into a horse. In other words, it’s possible to have a few accurate observations here and there, but then when we connect them in the mind, they get all distorted. So you have to watch very carefully. There’s a story about one of the famous Thai Jhansus, a student of Ajaan Mun, the founder of the forest tradition. When Ajaan Mun had passed away, this particular Jhan was very upset because he depended so much on his teacher. He wanted to help him through difficult periods in his meditation. Now his teacher was gone. He didn’t see anybody else who could help him in the same way. So he started reflecting, “What were the things that he taught?” One theme that came back again and again and again is that if anything comes up in the mind that you’re not totally sure what’s happening, even if you think you are sure about what’s happening, just stay with a sense of that awareness, the knower, the observer, and just watch. That’ll see you through so that you’re not jumping to conclusions that you’re not anticipating too much. Notice that when the Buddha describes the path, there’s no element of right anticipation. It’s right mindfulness, right concentration. Those are the main elements in practice of meditation. Right view means seeing where there’s suffering right now, where there’s stress right now, and then seeing the craving, the ignorance to cause it. That’s part of right view as well. You want to see these things as they’re actually happening. And this way, begin to sort out the patterns of the mind. When you begin to see that there’s errors in the mind that are more solid than others, more steady. As we said, we’re all here looking for happiness. As the Buddha once said, “There is no happiness other than peace.” Peace requires something steady. Even if you’re living in a turmoil, you can be peaceful as long as you have something steady inside that you can stay with. That’s what you’re looking for. So you’re peeling away all these different processes in the mind to see what really is steady. So that’s what we’re exploring to see. First, you develop states of concentration to provide a temporary platform, which depends on conditions. Anything that depends on conditions is going to have to change, but at least the state of concentration is relatively stable compared to other things. It allows you to form that foundation from which you can observe what’s going on in the mind. As your powers of mindfulness and concentration get stronger, you see things more and more precisely. Ultimately, you can see through to what really is changeless here in the mind. It’s something that doesn’t depend on causes. We don’t create it through the path. We find it. The traditional image is of a mountain. You follow a road to the mountain. The road doesn’t cause the mountain. The mountain’s already there. It was even there before the road was put through. But by following the road, you get to the mountain. That’s what this path of practice is. It’s the road to the mountain. Developing good qualities in the mind that open up to something that’s better than even the good qualities. But they can be found only when you really look. So we’re developing our qualities that allow you to see into your own mind. We’re providing a place of relative stability so you can see all those currents in the mind that used to ride along. And because you were riding along, all you could see was a blur of the trees on the riverbank as you were sailing past. But now that you stand still, you can see precisely what the leaves are like, what’s going on. You can watch the river itself more carefully. And it’s in the actual seeing rather than in the anticipation or our guesswork that we can really find the basis for true happiness, that inner peace, the potential for which is already there. Simply, we have to locate it. Once you’ve contacted that inner peace, then the aging, illness, and death of the body, separation from the people that you’ve learned to love, don’t dig so deeply into the mind. They can’t touch that peace. So we have an hour to meditate, an hour to observe. Make the best use of your time.

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