Using the World

October 22, 2004

Make yourself comfortable. Find a position you can keep for an hour. This applies both to the body and to the mind. The body, keep your back straight, comfortably straight. You don’t have to be a soldier. Place your hands in your lap, look forward, and close your eyes. As for the mind, give it a place where it can stay. The Buddha once noted that even if you think good thoughts, skillful thoughts, with no greed, anger, and delusion, a lot of thinking wears out the mind. So find a place where the mind can be comfortable. Keep it quiet. If it’s going to talk about anything to itself, have it talk about one thing—the breath. Because of all the physical things in the world, the breath is closest to the mind, the most intimate thing you can focus on that’s physical. It’s the aspect of the body that can be most quickly adjusted. You can change the rate of breathing. You can make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, any way that feels good. The more comfortable the breath, the easier it is to stay with it. So take some time to explore the breathing. You might want to start with some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. If it feels good, you can keep up that rhythm. If it doesn’t, you can change it a little longer, a little shorter, deeper, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. You can think of the breath as a tiny line of energy coming in and out of the body. You can think of it as a whole body’s worth of energy flow. Whatever is easiest to focus on feels most comfortable. This is called making use of what you’ve got. That’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about. We just had that chant about the world, and it sounds pretty depressing. The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world is nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. That applies to our body as much as to anything else. Yet here we are trying to find a sense of ease and comfort in the midst of all that. That’s the Buddha’s approach. Ultimate happiness, he says, is something that’s totally unconstructed, unfabricated, and unconditioned. And yet, how are you going to get there unless you use the conditioned, use what’s fabricated? Because you can’t use the unfabricated to get to the unfabricated, because it doesn’t function as a cause or an effect of anything at all. So take what you’ve got and you turn it into a path. Concentrate the mind on the path. Concentrate the mind on the breath, ultimately with the purpose of letting go. That’s one of the Buddhist definitions of the faculty of concentration. We hold onto the breath. We hold onto this state of ease that we can develop in the present moment, but ultimately we’ll have to let it go. But we’ll let it go when we get something better. So in the meantime, if you don’t have anything better, hold on right here. Because that chant about the world, it really is true. The world is swept away. That chant comes from a discourse where a young man who’d become a monk came back to visit his home and then went off to spend the day in the king’s game reserve. The king got news that the monk was there, and he went and asked him about this. Why did you ordain? You came from a wealthy family. You hadn’t lost your relatives. You had good health, everything anyone could want. And yet you left all that and became a monk, and now you’re sitting out under a tree. Why did you do it? So the monk gives these comments on the world. The king asks for an explanation. First, when the world is swept away, it does not endure. What does that mean, the king asks? So the monk asks the king in return, “How old are you now?” He says, “Eighty.” He says, “Back when you were young, were you strong?” He says, “Yes.” He didn’t know anyone who was as strong as he was. He thought he had the strength of several men. He says, “Well, how about now? Are you still that strong?” He says, “Oh no, sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place and I put it someplace else.” The monk says, “See, the world is swept away. It does not endure.” This is a lesson both in aging and in impermanence. How about the next one? The world offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. After all, he is the king. He’s got his palace. He’s got all his power. He’s got all his followers to help him. To protect him. So the monk asks, “Well, do you have any recurring illnesses?” The king says, “Yes, I have a recurring wind illness,” which in those days meant shooting pains from the body. He says, “Sometimes I’m lying in bed and people are hanging around saying, ‘Right now the king’s about to die. The king’s about to die.’” So the monk says, “When you’re in that amount of pain, can you give an order to your followers? I want you to share out this pain so I don’t have to bear it alone.” The king says, “Of course not.” So the monk says, “See, the world is without shelter. When pain comes like that, there’s nothing you can hide beyond.” It’s a lesson both in illness and in suffering. How about the next one? The world has nothing of its own and one has to pass on, leaving everything behind. The king says, “After all, I’ve got all these treasures stashed away up in the attics, down in the basement. I’ve got a lot that’s my own.” The monk asks him in return, “Well, when you die, can you take it with you?” The king says, “Well, no.” He has to leave it behind. Even his body, after all, is his own. He has to leave it behind. So the monk says, “See, the world has nothing of its own.” It’s a lesson both in death and in the teaching on not-self. And the final comment, “The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.” How do you explain that one? The king asks. The monk says, “Well, do you now rule over this prosperous country?” The king says, “Yes.” Suppose someone were to come from the east and say, “There’s another country to the east with all kinds of wealth, and with the forces you have, you could conquer it. What would you do?” The king says, “Well, of course I’d conquer it and rule that one too.” Well, suppose someone were to come from the south with the same message. “Well, I’d conquer that one as well.” How about the west? “I’d conquer that one too.” The north? “I’d conquer that one as well.” Suppose they came from the other side of the ocean with the same message. What would you do? “I’d conquer that one too.” This is an old man, eighty years old, about to die. The monk says, “See, the world is insufficient. There’s never enough.” As the Buddha once said, “If it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have enough for our desires.” This is the teaching on not-self. Why there is so much suffering in the world. We keep trying to find our happiness here in these things that change, things that offer no shelter, that are not really our own, that are always swept away. The monk said, “That’s why I ordained. That’s why I devoted my life to the practice. It’s good to keep these teachings in mind, whether you’re ordained or not. Where are you looking for your happiness?” Notice how the Buddha approaches the quest of looking for happiness in something that doesn’t change, that’s not swept away. You take these things that are swept away and you turn them into a path. You take things that are potentially stressful, like the body, and you learn how to make it as comfortable as possible. In other words, you don’t throw them away, you put them to use, but with the purpose, ultimately, of letting go. But don’t let go before you develop them. The path, of course, is virtue, concentration, and discernment. People are working on concentration right now, staying with the breath. You don’t let it go until you’ve really developed it. Explore the breath, because it’ll be a good ally for you along the path. It gives you a good place to stay, helps keep you in the present moment when it’s comfortable. Once it starts feeling pleasant, you can think of the breath spreading through different parts of the body. It’s not only makes it more pleasant, but it helps keep you awake. If you can keep your frame of reference encompassing the whole body, it’s a lot easier to stay awake as the breath gets comfortable. Otherwise, as things get easy and comfortable, you begin to let your range of awareness shrink down, and then you sleep, go off to sleep, or doze off, or go into a blurred state. That’s just what you’ve got to watch out for. Remember, you’re making use of things that have potential dangers, so you have to be careful. You have to be alert. But if you’re alert and discerning, you can make use of whatever comes up. As the Jatali one said, “Be a person with two eyes.” When things come up, look at both their good side and their bad side. Don’t get fixated on either side, which means that everything you use, because it is constructed, because it is fabricated by nature, requires that you be heedful. You have a sense of time and place. There are times in the practice when you do want to hold on to the breath, but there will be other times when you want to let go. There are times in the practice when you want to develop a healthy sense of self, a self that’s willing to make sacrifices, seeing that by giving up immediate small pleasures right now, there’s a larger happiness that’s waiting for you. You want a long-term happiness rather than a quick fix. That, by definition, is a healthy sense of self. It’s one of your strategies along the path. There will come other times when you want to let go of that sense of self. Whatever you’re identifying with ultimately is going to have to be let go. But there’s a time and a place for all this. One of the functions in discernment is just that, and they call it kalanutta. It’s having a sense of time—the right time to hold on, the right time to let go. So that means that looking at everything for both its strengths and its weaknesses is its potential to help you and its potential to get in the way. When you have this two-sided vision, or ability to look at things from many sides, that’s what’s going to protect you. Don’t be a person with just one eye. So as you’re working with the breath, once it’s comfortable, allow your awareness to go through the body systematically. You can start around, say, the navel. Notice how it feels there. When you breathe in, how it feels when you breathe out. If it feels comfortable, maintain that same rhythm. If it doesn’t, you can change. If you see any sense of tension or tightness around the navel, around the abdomen, you can allow it to relax. Relax both as you breathe in, relax as you breathe out. Then move your attention over to the right. Do the same things there. Locate that part of the body in your awareness. Watch it as you breathe in, breathe out. Relax any sense of tension or tightness. Then go over to the left and do the same things there. Then move your attention up around the solar plexus. Again, center, right, left. Up to the chest, center, right, left. Base of the throat, shoulders, the head, down the back, out the legs. Starting again at the back of the neck, going down the shoulders and out the arms until you’ve covered the whole body. You can keep this up as long as you like, as many times as you like. So you’re ready to settle down. Then you choose any one spot in the body where it feels comfortable. So to say, standard, allow your awareness to settle in there and then spread it out to fill the whole body. So you’re aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Then you can allow it to stay there. There’s nothing else you have to do right now. This is the foundation for the path. A lot of people, once the mind settles down and has a little bit of stillness, say, “What’s next when we go on to discernment?” Well, the foundation has to be solid before you can build anything on it. And if the mind does settle down, allow it to stay settled. It’s nourishing. It’s strengthening for the mind to have this ability to stay centered. Then try to maintain that sense of centered but broad awareness, even as you leave the meditation, because it’s in those cracks in your life, cracks between formal practice and informal practice, that issues come up. If you’re centered and aware, you see them. This is how discernment arises. You begin to see how the mind latches onto things, creates suffering for itself. Because you’re coming from a position of strength, a position of stillness, you can see how the mind inflicts itself with its activities, when they’re not skillful. This is how discernment begins. So you need this foundation. This should underlie everything. And as you’re in this centered position, this is what allows you to see. You see other things that come up in the mind, to see whether they’re useful or not. Because it’s not the case that you try not to think at all. Thought is a part of life. And again, there’s skillful thinking and unskillful thinking, just like there are skillful actions and unskillful actions, skillful ways of speaking and unskillful ways of speaking. How do you think the Buddha figured these things out? By watching them in terms of cause and effect. Where did he watch them from? The state of stillness. So this is where you want to be. And as you get used to being here, as it becomes more and more your natural home, you’re in a better and better position to figure things out on your own. Whatever comes up in life, what are its uses? What are its dangers? In other words, how does it help? Does it help bring about a solid, reliable happiness? And how can it get in the way? And as you use your experience of the world in this way, both the things that come at you through the senses and your own construction of the world, you find you can turn it into a path. And the whole principle of cause and effect, which lay at the essence of the Buddha’s awakening, shows how it can be used to open up to something that’s beyond cause and beyond effect. So even though the world is swept away, you can use these things before they get swept away to find something that doesn’t get swept away. This world that offers no shelter, when you use it properly, you find that that’s one of the epithets for Nirvana, is shelter. It all depends on how you use things. That’s why the question of skill is so basic to the Buddhist teachings. We’re here to learn a skill. And it’s a skill unlike any other, because it can take you past what’s inconstant, stressful, not-self. It can take you past aging, illness, and death, past craving. and your other skill quite like it.

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