Staying in the Now

December 21, 2004

Make a promise to yourself that for the next hour you’re going to stay right here. Then do what you can to maintain that promise. Part of it means doing what you can to make it easy. Focus on making the breath comfortable. Explore the breath. Learn how to get interested in how the breath is flowing in the body. After all, it has an enormous effect on the health of the body and the health of the mind. You can stay anywhere inside the body. Just don’t let your awareness go outside the skin. Everything from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. Learn how to get interested in how the breath is flowing in the different parts of the body. Try to get down to the details. Because many times you find the details make all the difference. Here or there can make all the difference in whole areas of the body. You loosen a little bit of tension and you find it fires off other loosening up patterns throughout unexpected parts of the body. So there’s a lot to explore. That’s the carrot for keeping you here. Then there’s got to be the stick as well. You’ve got to keep reminding yourself why it’s important to stay here and that you’ve really got to be true to yourself. If you can’t stick to your own promises to yourself, what can you be trusted with? If you can’t trust your mind right here as things are comfortable, how are you going to trust it when things get difficult? When illness comes, when death comes, how can you trust the mind to stay in line at those times? Because it’s the mind thrashing around at those times. It creates an awful lot of suffering. You have to keep it on target. Keep your views in line. In other words, learn not to identify with the body, not to identify with the pains that are arising in the body, and all the crazy mental chatter that’s going to surround those things. If you get involved in the chatter, you’re done for. It takes a long time to disentangle yourself. So you have to have that awareness. You have to have some ready views and ready skills to handle these things. So try to keep your mind firm. Keep your intention firm. Even though the helicopters are going over, you don’t have to give them any mind. Remember what the Buddha said about those who win out over themselves are much more outstanding, much greater than those who try to win out over themselves. The world always seems determined to go its way, with greed, anger, and delusion. It’s much better to start out by winning out over your own greed, anger, and delusion. So try to keep your intention firm right here. Make it like a rock. The word for sila, sometimes they relate to sela, which is rock. You want to make your virtue like rock. What is your virtue? Your virtue is your intentions. No matter what, you’re not going to break the precepts. You have to have that same kind of determination as you meditate. No matter what, you’re not going to stray away from the breath. So try to develop a sense of the integrity and the dignity of what you’re doing here, this restraint that you’re holding over the mind. Because it is this quality of restraint that gives dignity to human life. If you’re always giving in to your whims, always giving in to your notions, where is the dignity there? So develop a sense of the integrity that’s required here for keeping the mind solid, keeping its intention firm and steady. They talk about the mind of an arahant being like rock, a pillar on a rocky mountain, a stone pillar that’s buried halfway in the ground. So no matter what happens, no matter how many winds come, or how strong the winds come, or from what direction, it doesn’t shiver at all. That’s the direction in which you’re trying to head. So try to keep that same sense of firmness and integrity. Give weight. The word weight in Pali is interesting because it also means respect. Show respect for what you’re doing. This is an important activity. It’s not something that you play around with. After all, the issue itself is important. If you’re careless, you’re going to suffer. Suffering is such a waste. Places of weight on your own mind. You’re suffering places of weight on other people, either indirectly, because when you’re suffering, it’s hard for you to do what you know is right. Sometimes you can’t even take care of yourself, in which case it falls burden to other people as well. I remember it was my father who was dying. It struck me, all the suffering he was going through, and I kept thinking to myself, “What point does it serve? What purpose does it serve?” It served no purpose at all. At least when you’re meditating, if there is suffering in the body, you can make it serve a purpose in training the mind. Just as when you’re dealing with the breath and making it comfortable, that pleasure can serve a purpose in training the mind. For most people, pleasure and pain serve no purpose at all. When pleasure comes, they just wallow in the pleasure, treating it as an end in itself. And then, of course, it goes. When pain comes, they treat it as something to avoid at all cost. And again, it serves no purpose. Many times it serves a negative purpose because of the things people do when they’re in pain. Feeling weak and fearful can just make things worse. But if you learn to treat pleasure and pain as means to training the mind, then they serve a real purpose. After all, pain is a noble truth. So show it some respect. Try to comprehend it. Try to understand it. Pleasure is a noble truth as well—the pleasure of the concentrated mind. So try to treat pleasure as—focus on the kind of pleasure that can lead to concentration, that can give nourishment to your concentration. And as for whatever pains come, treat them as something to comprehend. Learn exactly where the pain is related to the mental suffering, and learn where that connection is not necessary. That way, whatever comes up serves a real purpose. So as you’re meditating, it’s to keep the mind steady, to keep it focused. To keep it strong and firm, you have to see both the purpose of the pleasure and the purpose of the pain. Realize the importance of what you’re doing so that you can really stick with it. Because, as the Buddha points out, we never know how much time we’re going to have. But you do have now, and then you have now again, and then now again. So as long as now keeps coming, see what you can gain from it. Focus on understanding your intentions. Again, it’s that issue of some people treat being in the now as an end in and of itself. It’s not an end. It’s part of the path. And the part of now that is the path is the element of intention. So focus on keeping that now right here as part of the path to the end of suffering. And when your thoughts wander away from the now, remind yourself that this is where the real lessons come. And you never know precisely when they’re going to come, so you’ve got to keep watch for them right here. It’s like being a hunter. You never know when the rabbit’s going to come past. But you have to sit right there. This is the spot where rabbits tend to come. So you sit down here and you’re very quiet so as not to scare them away, but you’re alert so that you don’t miss them when they do come. And it’s the continuity of your gaze, of your attention, of your alertness. That’s what determines whether you’re going to have supper or not. So notice what works in keeping your attention steady. Try to make the present moment as interesting as possible. So you can keep your attention steady. Keep the mind here with as little effort as possible and as much alertness as possible. That’s what makes all the difference.

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