Desire to Practice, The

December 24, 2004

Each time when you sit down to meditate, remind yourself of why you want to do it. Because desire is one of the necessary parts of the path. We tend to forget that. But right effort depends on desire. What they call the basis for success depends on desire. Desire for what? Desire for true happiness. That’s why we’re here. If the mind wanders off and thinks of other things it would like to do or wants to do, ask it, “What kind of true happiness do you get there?” This is why we have that reflection before the meditation. Subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. If you look for your happiness in things that are subject to these qualities, these events, how long can you trust that happiness? Then we have that fifth reflection, “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions.” In other words, whatever true happiness you find has to come out of your own actions. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. And for the actions to be good, skillful, wise, the mind has to be well-nourished. So where are you going to find your sense of nourishment to keep the mind strong? Because if the mind isn’t strong, it’s not going to be willing to do whatever difficult things are needed to do for the sake of a really lasting happiness. The Buddha talks about three kinds of nourishment or food for the mind. There’s contact with the senses, there’s consciousness at the senses, and then there’s the intentions of the mind. So we want the feeling that comes from that contact and that consciousness to be pleasant. We want the intentions to be gratifying. So we try to look for nourishment right here in the present moment. Right at the contact, right at the consciousness. This is why we work with the breath, because the breath is the element of the body that’s easiest to change, that’s easiest to work with. Start out by trying to explore how you can get a really good sense of breath energy in the body. One way is just to go through the body, place by place by place, relaxing the muscles. Start at the top of the head. Work down, especially in your face, around the eyes, the jaws, down the neck, down the back, the shoulders, all over the body. Think of all the blood vessels opening up and relaxing. Then breathe in and breathe out, keeping that whole body relaxed like that. You’ll find that it’s a different sensation of breathing. Normally, we tend to tense up the body one spot or another in order to breathe, either to pull the breath in or to squeeze the breath energy out. When we’re meditating, sometimes we like to mark the line between an in-breath or an out-breath by squeezing the blood vessels at some point. We’ll learn not to do that. Just keep everything wide open in the body, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. If you can maintain that sense of open relaxation, it grows from just a simple sense of openness to a real sense of fullness. It may take some time. Be patient. But you want to give yourself something really visceral, something that feels good right here, right now. Because we talk about nourishing the mind. It doesn’t want to just be told, “Well, this is good for you.” It wants some sort of really unpleasant health food. It wants some food that tastes good. So give it something that tastes good, a sense of the breathing in and the breathing out. And as for intentions, remind yourself that you’re not here tying the mind down to the body. You want to explore the body. Ask questions. Keep surveying the body over and over again. Where does the tension build up when it comes? Where does it come? How does it sneak up on you? How can you stay alert so that it doesn’t build up tension again in the body? Or if you have some parts of the body where the tension tends to hang on, how can you be very patient and just sort of let the good breath energy flow over, flow over, flow over, until it eventually begins to soften up a little bit, dissolve away a little bit? Because if the breath doesn’t feel good in the present moment, if your body doesn’t feel good in the present moment, the meditation won’t seem gratifying. After a while, it gets dull. And you want to think of other places to go, other things to do, other things to think about. So make it your intention to explore this aspect of the energy that’s keeping you alive, that’s keeping the body running. After all, if the breath stopped, where would you be? The mind and the body couldn’t stay together at all. So this is what keeps everything together. And it only stands to reason that if you pay careful attention to it, you’ll begin to notice what kind of breathing keeps things together in a really comfortable, really nourishing way. This is something you have to explore. Because a lot of the way you relate to your breath is extremely personal. It’s subverbal. It’s hard to find words, many times, for how the breathing feels. So you have to deal specifically with the direct sensation of the breath as it comes in, as it goes out, as it stays still, as it moves around in different ways. And try to notice where there’s a lapse of mindfulness, where there’s a lapse of alertness that allows the tension to build up again. This is a really good way of training the mind to be mindful and alert all around. Because you want not only good breath energy to fill the body, you want your awareness to fill the body as well. The broader your sense of awareness here in the present moment, the more difficult it is for the mind to slip off to the past or the future. If your awareness fills the body down to the hands and the feet, it’s like it’s tied down, hand and foot. It’s going to have to slip out of your hands and feet if it wants to move to the future, move to the past. So try to keep yourself aware all around like this, as the Buddha said. You can feed on rapture. It’s food for the mind. And there’s that sense of fullness that comes. It’s kind of a refreshment. You’ve been using the nerves of your face and your head, different parts of your body, especially when you have to do a lot of studying, when you have to do a lot of reading and thinking. They get squeezed of their breath energy, and they get frazzled and burned out. So now we’re trying to nourish them back to life, nourish them back to health, with good breath energy. It may take time, so be patient. All too often, you can’t expect the results to come right away. When they don’t come right away, you get impatient and move off someplace else. A lot of the healing that has to take place as you meditate is like a rash on your skin. You have to put a soothing cream on the rash and don’t expect it to do away with the rash right away. It’ll give some cooling sensation to begin with, but the cream has to stay there on the rash. You just can’t put it on and then immediately take it off and hope that the rash will be gone. The cream has to seep in, soak in, mend the skin. The same way with a meditation. If you’re patient, this comfortable sense of breath energy can do its work. It’s not only food, it’s also medicine for the mind, medicine for the body. So when you come to experience the meditation as a nourishing activity, not something mechanical that you have to force yourself to do, but something that really feels good, you find that sense of desire for doing the practice gets stronger and stronger, more reliable. If you find that you’re getting bored, it’s a sign that you’re not paying careful attention. Because once you deal with the major patterns of stress in the body, then you can work on the more refined ones. See how refined you can work this cure. See how refined you can nourish all the little starved-out parts of the body. And when you do this, the desire to meditate gets stronger. The stronger the desire, the easier it is to meditate for long periods of time. When you’re treating the mind and the body from within like this, it’s a gift not only to yourself but also to the people around you. You’re in a better mood, you feel more nourished, you’re less likely to go feeding on other people. You’re less likely to subject them to your greed, anger, and delusion. Because when there’s a sense of fullness within, you look at those kinds of activities and you wonder, “Why would anybody want to do them?” It’s like after having healed yourself of a poison ivy rash, you’re just jumping back into the poison ivy. So work on developing this sense of desire in both of these ways. One is to simply give yourself a very comfortable way of relating to the body in the present moment so it feels good, feels nourishing, feels gratifying, just to stay right here. Keep everything open and relaxed as you breathe in, open and relaxed as you breathe out. Maintain that sense of open relaxation no matter whether you’re breathing in, breathing out, or in between. Don’t let there be any pauses, any gaps. That’s one way of nourishing that sense of desire. The other way is to keep reminding yourself, “If you don’t do this, what’s life going to be like?” There are other kinds of happiness that you look for. Do they provide any real gratification, any real security? So, reflecting on the nourishment and the sense of fullness that comes with the breathing and comparing that with the frazzled sense of desperation that comes with so much of our other quest for happiness, you compare the two. This gives even more strength to your desire to keep on practicing, because there’s no guarantee of how much more time you have to practice. So, as long as the time is here, give it everything you’ve got, because it will give you a lot in return.

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