Seeing Requires Focus

December 25, 2004

Happiness requires effort. Ease and well-being require effort. It sounds paradoxical. We like to think that happiness comes simply from relaxing, from things falling into place on their own without our having to do anything. But that’s because of our own misperception. The reason things do fall into place is because we’ve done good things in the past and we’re doing good things in the present. So if we want happiness in the future, we have to do good things now. And if we want happiness in the present moment, it requires an effort as well. Look at your mind. If it’s wandering all over the place, there’s only one way you’re going to get it to settle down, and that’s by making up your mind you want to settle down, and then sticking with that intention. And that right there requires effort, because the nature of the mind is so often that whatever intention comes into the mind, you go right with it. And when you start getting lazy, then anything can pop up in the mind and you go with anything at all. Or sometimes you get a little bit of happiness, a little bit of pleasure, and then you stop making any effort, thinking, “Well, this is good enough. I’ll stay right here for the time being.” And then all the causes that went into creating that happiness start unraveling, so it’s not going to last. If you want a lasting happiness, it requires skill, it requires dedication. So we’re working at pleasure here, working at happiness. The Pali word sukha means “pleasure,” “happiness,” “ease,” and “well-being.” These are all the qualities we’re working at right now. In the beginning, it’s simply the struggle of getting the mind to settle down. You choose an object and you just make up your mind you’re going to stay there. Then simply try to be mindful, try to be alert. Keep reminding yourself to stay here and keep watching over the mind to make sure that it stays with its object. And then you want to use some discernment as well. What ways of keeping it with the object are productive, and what ways are not? You find that certain ways of breathing help keep the mind with the breath. So you breathe in those ways, you explore for a while, get the mind to settle down. Give it a good place to stay. And then the question arises, how good is good enough? And if you let your standards slide after a while, you find that you’re not satisfied with it. So you have to keep on trying to be more and more meticulous. Pay really close attention to how the breathing feels in the different parts of the body. And also notice that there are going to be parts of the body that don’t immediately open up. They stay hardened, closed off. It turns out that those are the really sensitive ones. It’s like turtles. They say turtles have a very soft and sensitive body, which is why they need that hard shell. And you find that you’ve got turtles in your body, sections that are encased. And if you try to force them to relax, they’ll resist. So you have to use an indirect approach to being very sensitive with the other parts of the body that do open themselves up and be very, very patient. The more sensitive, the more patient you are. Ultimately, those hardened parts, the turtles in the body, will eventually open up. And then you’ll find that the meditation really does go straight to the heart. But you have to prove first that you’re sensitive, meticulous, patient. It’s like trying to get knowledge of any kind. You look at the definitive books on different subjects, and they’re the ones where the author was very painstaking, didn’t rush into print, very carefully looked at all the evidence, considered things from all sides. Until they thoroughly comprehended the subject, then they’re willing to put the book into print. And those are the books that last for a long time. It’s the same with the knowledge that comes from meditation. You want knowledge that’s going to serve you for a long time. So you have to be patient, you have to be careful, meticulous, gentle with the breath. Always on the lookout to see new things. That doesn’t mean you’re going to see new things all the time, but you have to be ready, you have to be open to the possibility. That way, the knowledge that you gain into the mind becomes definitive knowledge, the knowledge you gain about your body, the way the energy in the body reacts with the energy in the mind. That becomes definitive knowledge, too. This comes under the Pali term citta, which means mind in some cases, but in other cases means firm intent, that you’re really giving yourself to it, giving your full attention. Because the more you give to the meditation, the more you get out of it. This is a lesson that generosity brings. If you’re used to being generous outside—generous with things, generous with your knowledge, generous with your time and energy, having learned the lesson that the things you’re going to gain from life come from the things that you give, then when you come to the meditation, you’ve got to have that same attitude. The way you get out of the meditation depends on the patience and attention, the effort that you give to it. So when things begin to slough off in the meditation or it seems less and less gratifying, you can ask yourself, “What are you not giving? What more could you give?” That doesn’t have to be the kind of effort that exhausts you, but it means that you have to be really meticulous, pay very careful attention, and consider things from all sides. That way, you start seeing things in the meditation that you didn’t see before. There’ll be subtle levels of ease and well-being that you hadn’t noticed before. All comes from paying careful and meticulous attention and making your attention more and more meticulous, more careful. Keep trying to push the envelope. After all, it’s not the case as we’re sitting here and meditating that when the next stage of insight arises, it’s going to take you someplace else. Not really any gods or goddesses that are going to come down and lift your mind out of your body and take you to some heaven someplace where they reveal all the secrets of the world. That’s not how it happens. And even if it does happen that way, you can’t really trust them. There’s that story about the person who had gone down to some Indian tribe in Brazil and was taking their hallucinogen and saw all these beings who had told him all the secrets of the world, as they said. And after he came out of the experience, he told the medicine man, and the medicine man said, “Oh yeah, that’s what they all say. That’s what they always say, those people.” So even if some god or goddess did come down and told you everything, you couldn’t take it for sure that it was true knowledge. The knowledge you’re looking for is something that’s right here, simply that you’re not looking carefully enough, you’re not seeing carefully enough yet. Otherwise, you’d see it. So this is where the envelope of the effort goes. It goes more and more into being more meticulous, more careful, using appropriate attention, learning how to ask the right questions about what you’re experiencing. In other words, if you’re looking for your true self, you’re using the wrong framework, the wrong terms. If you’re looking for the issue of where is there suffering, why is there suffering, what can be done to put an end to suffering, those are the right questions. And then you look more and more carefully here, because what you want to look for is right here. What you want to find is right here. So keep your attention focused right here. It’s like those pictures in the newspaper, “Where’s Waldo?” You keep looking at the picture. Sometimes you have to change your focus, but it’s always there inside the picture. Waldo is not on another page. Waldo is right here. So keep looking right here. And the more careful your focus, the more meticulous your attention, the more sensitive you are to what’s going on right here, the more you’ll see. And the greater the sense of well-being, ease, happiness, pleasure that comes as a result. As your effort in the meditation gets more finely tuned and becomes more and more right effort, the kind of effort that really does make a difference. You can’t barge your way into nirvana, but you can’t drift your way into nirvana either. It’s something you see. So focus the effort on the seeing.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2004/041225%20Seeing%20Requires%20Focus.mp3>