Training for Happiness

May 14, 2005

Try to sit comfortably. Keep your back erect so you can sit for a long period of time. If you slouch over, it’s going to get uncomfortable after a while. Place your hands on your lap, close your eyes, and then breathe comfortably. Notice what kind of breathing feels good. That’s all you have to pay attention to right now. It’s just the breath. Any other thoughts that come into your mind, you can let them go. Try to be sensitive to how the breathing feels. When it comes in, does it feel good? Is it too long? Is it too short? If it feels too long or too short, you can adjust it. Is it too heavy? Is it too light? What kind of breathing really feels good right now? The more consistently you say with the breath, the more easily you’ll see this. The more easily you’ll be able to judge what feels right for the body right now. It’s amazing. We live with the breath ever since we’re born, and we very rarely notice it that much. And it has a lot of potential for giving rise to a sense of ease and well-being inside. If the breath feels constricted, not only does it feel bad in the present moment, but it’s also bad for your health. So think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, in whatever way feels good right now. Try to breathe in a way that feels refreshing, and try to keep your awareness with the breath. The Buddha once said that when the mind is trained, it brings happiness. In fact, that is a source of happiness, is learning how to train your mind. How does the mind need training? Well, look at it. One of the first things you notice when you try to keep your attention with the breath is that you find it doesn’t stay. All of a sudden, you find yourself all thinking about something else, and the slightest thing can set it off. From the outside, there may be a noise, there may be a pain in your body, or some vagrant memory may come floating up into your mind and take you off with it. What you don’t realize is that the mind made a choice to go with those things. It all happens so quickly that we hardly notice it. This is called the mind that hasn’t been trained. It’s out of control. Simply trying to keep it with something as simple and basic and easy as the breath, you find it’s difficult. It always seems to want to go off someplace else. So you have to pull it back. As soon as you catch it, bring it back. That’s the training. In other words, you want to be more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing. Then you find that over time, you catch it more quickly. That’s called developing two qualities, mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is simply keeping something in mind. Like right now, you’re going to keep the breath in mind. You tell yourself that’s what you want to do while you’re here, sitting and meditating. And then alertness keeps watch over what happens. It keeps watch over the breath to make sure that it’s comfortable, and it keeps watch over the mind to make sure it’s going to stay. If you catch it slipping off, bring it right back. If you catch it slipping off again, bring it back again. Keep at this until you find that the mind is more and more willing to stay. And it’s more willing to stay when the breath is comfortable. So work on focusing on that. What feels really good right now as you breathe in? What kind of breathing out feels good? If you find that the needs of the body change in terms of what kind of breathing feels good, well, let the breathing change in order to keep supplying the body with the kind of breath that feels good. Each breath coming in, each breath going out. As with any training, if it’s just the stick, the mind is going to rebel. You need a carrot as well. You need some rewards for the mind. And so you reward it with comfortable breathing. That way, the mind begins to settle down a little bit more and you begin to see your own mind a lot more clearly. You see your microphone more clearly, too, because the movements of the mind are very quick. Your mindfulness has to be quick as well. Your alertness has to be sharp so that when the mind moves, you know. And you’re more and more in a position to make wise choices in how the mind is going to go. Because if it seems that the mind just automatically feels fear when there’s something threatening or feels anger when there’s something displeasing, that’s because you’re not quick enough to see the steps. There are times when nothing displeasing is happening and yet the mind cooks up things to get angry about. It’s actually looking for something to get angry, even before there’s anything there. That can happen. Or sometimes the mind does react to outside stimuli, but it all seems so quick and automatic that it seems that it has to be that way. That’s because the mind isn’t trained yet. Its mindfulness isn’t steady enough. Its alertness isn’t quick enough. And so we just keep falling into our old habits. Whatever way we used to react to things, that’s the way we just keep on reacting. Part of this is because we’re not quick enough. The other part is because we don’t understand the ways of the mind. We don’t understand how much choice it has. This is why the Buddha spent so much time teaching about karma, the principle of action. He said that every moment we experience not only the results of our past actions but also the results of our intentions in the present moment. And you can’t change your past actions, but you can change your present intentions. The thing is that they’re there so much of the time that we hardly notice them. They move so quickly that they pass us by in a blur, even though they’re there. They are our intentions. If we’re totally subject to our past actions, there’d be nothing we can do. But it’s because we have this potential for putting a present intention in with every moment. That’s what gives us our freedom. That’s the part we want to train. So we’re clearer about what the intentions are, and we have a better sense of the range of choices. When you understand this point, then you can start looking for where is the choice in the present moment. Sometimes it’s simply deciding which thought to focus on or which sensation to focus on. That, in and of itself, is pretty important. You could sit here thinking about all the horrible things that happen in your life and get very, very upset about that. Everybody has had bad things happen in their lives. When you focus on the bad things that have happened, it just gets you in a worse mood. You’re more and more likely to do foolish things. Or you could focus on what you’ve done in the past—either things you’ve done in the past that were wrong or things you’ve done in the past that were right. Instead of focusing on how much you’re a victim of circumstances, you can focus on how much control you have over things. When you think in that way, it’ll have a very different effect on the mind. When you have a sense of your own power, you learn also how to be more heedful, wise, and careful in how you exercise that power. This is why the way you view things is so important. If you view yourself as a passive victim, you’re not likely to be careful about what you do. You tend to thrash around and simply react to events. But if you have a greater and greater sense of how much you are in control, you begin to look for what ways you make good use of that control, good use of that power, and which ways you don’t. And you’re more likely to learn what works and what doesn’t as far as making yourself happy. This is why the Buddha said, “The Buddha’s path is not just one of doing a meditation practice, but it’s also a matter of having right views, understanding the principle of action, how action can lead to happiness, how action can lead to suffering, and learning to be more and more sensitive to this power of choice you have in the present moment.” So when you develop mindfulness and concentration, try to do it with right view as well. The view is what opens the possibility in your mind that you may have the power of choice over your emotions, your reactions. And then the meditation allows you to confirm that you begin to see, yes, you really do have a choice. You could sit here focusing on the breath, or you could sit focusing on your plans for tomorrow, your memory of yesterday, things that make you happy, things that make you sad. You have that choice. It’s very clear to see while you’re sitting here very still. It’s not so easy to see when you’re in the midst of quick events. But if you develop your mindfulness here, develop your alertness here, and try to carry that mindfulness and alertness into the rest of your life, you begin to see, yeah, you do have a choice. Even when things are happening very fast. It’s simply a matter of where you focus your attention and how consistent your attention is, how consistent your focus is. Once you see the moments where you’re making your choices, then you have a better chance of making them wise choices. That’s why the mind, when it’s trained, brings happiness. Because only when it’s trained can you catch it in time, direct it in time. So it keeps on choosing to do the skillful thing, the thing that leads to happiness both for yourself and for the people around you. Without that training, happiness is pretty hit or miss. With that training, you find that you can make the wise choice in any set of circumstances. And it’s how you use your power of choice that makes all the difference in the world.

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