Using What You’ve Got

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One of the basic principles of the practice is that you make use of what you’ve got. The raw materials of the practice are things that are right here, right now. You’ve got the body. You’ve got feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness. For the most part, we tend to carry these things around, like baggage. The trick is to convert them into the path. So what have you got? You’ve got the breath. That’s the main factor in the body. So let’s focus on that. Then you notice there are feelings that go along with the breath. Sometimes the breath is comfortable, sometimes it’s not. Because it’s easier to stay with comfortable sensations, let’s try to keep the breath comfortable. Get a sense of what’s just right for the breath. When it’s too long, when it’s too short, how you can just think it back to just right. The more sensitive you get to that, the more you have an important set of tools. What keeps the breath comfortable is the perception. Just breath, breath, breath. Think of every cell in the body as breathing. Tune into that level of your awareness. There are many things going on in the present moment, many levels of reality. You could sit here thinking of yourself as a tiny speck in the vast cosmos. That’s one level of reality. Or you could think about the chemical elements that go up to make up your body. That’s another level of reality. You could think about whether your body is appealing to other people or whether it’s appealing to yourself. That’s another level of reality. The question is, are those levels of reality useful for putting an end to suffering? So when you place the label just on breath, just think of everything as being related to breath energy. A sense of energy flow throughout the body. Just tune into that level of reality, and the perception is what keeps you tuned in. And what keeps that perception going? Well, there’s an element of will, and particularly two types of things. There’s directed thought. You keep reminding yourself, “Stay with the breath. Stay with the breath.” And as you’re adjusting the breath, that’s called evaluation. You adjust it and see how it feels. Does this feel right yet? Well, if not, you can change. And when it does feel right, think of the comfortable sensation of it spreading out. You don’t have to push it or pull it out. Just allow it to spread on its own, like melted butter spreading through your body. And then you’re conscious of all this. Primarily of the breath, but also conscious of the other activities, because you have to notice when they’re slipping so that you keep yourself with the breath. That’s it. You’ve just taken the five khandhas and you’ve converted them into the path. You’ve converted them into right concentration, or at least in the direction of right concentration. Breath is form. Feelings are cause and effect. Of course, feelings of pleasure and pain are feelings. The perception of breath is a perception. You’re directed thought and evaluation. Those are sankharas, or fabrications. And then you’re conscious of all this. What better place to settle down so you can learn about the five khandhas? You’ve got all of them present here. You’ve got them all acting. Because that’s what the khandhas are. The aggregates are activities. The Buddha defines them as verbs. And so you’ve got them in action. And the best way to learn about them is to actually do something with them. It’s like becoming a good cook. If you want to learn about eggs, you don’t just sit and look at eggs. You crack them open and you put them in a pot. You put them in a pan. You boil them. You fry them. You make scrambled eggs. You try making scrambled eggs over high heat and you make scrambled eggs over low heat. You see the difference. And you combine them with different ingredients. And after a while, you find which ways you like your eggs. And you’ve learned a lot about eggs in the process. Much more than if you just took the eggs out, put them on the counter, and looked at them. The Buddha says, “Suffering is what? The five clinging aggregates.” How are you going to learn about suffering? Well, you put them all together right here. And you learn to put them together. You put them together in different ways. You can make them into different levels of concentration. And you can apply them to different… Once the concentration gets developed, you can apply that to different issues. John Fulon used to say there are three basic steps in practicing concentration. One is learning how to do it. The second is how to maintain it. That’s where mindfulness comes in. It’s very important to keep it going. And then the third step is learning how to put it to use. You can use it to understand all kinds of things about yourself. The power of concentration can be used for all kinds of activities. But most important, you can use it to understand pain, suffering. So you can apply it to particular pains, particular moments of suffering in the mind. Or you can start using your newfound power as a concentration to look at the basic raw materials of concentration itself, because they’re all right there. So it’s not that concentration practice is one thing and insight practice is something else. The two have to go together. The element of tranquility is one. It allows you to settle down so you can see things properly, but it also gives you the strength you need. Say you’re going to try to understand pain. The mind has to have a feeling of well-being, a feeling of confidence, so that it can deal with the pain. And what better way of getting confidence than to learn how to control your mind, to have it focus on what you want to have it focused on and learn how to have it stay focused there? When you find you can do that, you feel up to bigger challenges. After all, as the Buddha said, pain, suffering, these are things you want to comprehend. Our normal reaction to them is to try to run away. We feel threatened by them. We feel weak in the face of them. But if you can strengthen the sense of the mind’s well-being, you feel less threatened, you feel less weak, and you’re more encouraged to deal with this issue. Why is there pain? Why does a physical pain cause pain to the mind? It’s one of those questions that most people don’t ask. They just assume it has to be that way. There’s pain in the body, the mind has to be pained. But the Buddha made that important distinction. There can be pain, but there doesn’t have to be suffering. There’s the simple pain of the aggregates of the three characteristics, but there’s also the suffering that’s caused by craving. This is why when he uses the word dukkha in the three characteristics, it’s not quite the same as dukkha in the four noble truths. The three characteristics are just the way things are in and of themselves. But the suffering of the four noble truths is something that’s created by craving and ignorance. That’s something you can do something about. So you want to learn how to comprehend the difference between the two types of pain and suffering. And particularly, how does craving and ignorance come in? To take an ordinary physical pain and turn it into a mental pain. That’s what you want to learn how to do with these powers of concentration you’re working on. It requires some ingenuity, because you’ll find that the mind has lots of different ways of cooking up craving, cooking up ignorance. Therefore, the different pathways by which pain turns into suffering are going to require different techniques, different ways of applying your powers of concentration. Some of these are reported in the teachings of the greater jhanas. You look at the pain, try to figure out exactly where the pain is strongest, and you’ll find that it starts moving around. You begin to see that the pain is a lot more erratic than your original perception. Sometimes you can use a very focused concentration and the pain will actually go away as long as you’re focused. Other times you can take that sense of well-being and just smother the pain. The well-being that comes from a comfortable breath is spread out throughout the whole body. As long as you’re focused on that, the pain goes into the background. And even though the potential for pain is there, you’re not weaving it into an actual pain. That shows you that the experience of pain is not just a passive thing. There’s an element of will. There’s an element of present activity in the mind, and that’s precisely what you want to observe, because that’s the troublemaker. And that element of will involves our same old friends perception and thought constructs. This, again, is where concentration comes in handy, because you’ve been learning about perceptions and thought constructs as you get the mind to be concentrated. So you’re more familiar in the way they fashion your reality. The more you apply them consciously, the more you can catch them as they’re doing things in a subconscious way. So this is why we spend all this time focusing on the breath, focusing on the breath. The breath isn’t the troublemaker. It’s not the problem. But it’s a great place to focus to develop the skills you need to deal with more subtle problems, more subtle issues. One very simple way of seeing the power of perception is to try to keep this perception of breath in mind through all your activities. Not only while you’re sitting here, but also throughout the day. Have a sense of breath, breath, breath. Make that your top priority. Other levels of reality can become secondary—your social level, your thoughts about what other people are doing, what they’re saying, what they’re thinking. Let them be secondary. Let the breath be primary. Even your sense of the body as being solid, let that dissolve away into the breath. Imagine the perception of breath energy, breath energy, and keep that going all day long. See what it does. See what you learn about the power of perception. It’s called learning how to make good use of what you’ve already got. And the amazing thing about it is that when you learn how to make good use of what you’ve already got, it’ll take you to places. You’ve never been before. So don’t let your thoughts wander off into great abstractions. Keep them focused on what you’ve got right here, right now. Because this is where the path lies.

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