Exercising Discernment

October 22, 2005

As we meditate, we’re working on a skill. It’s important to reflect on what you need to bring to any activity to turn it into a skill. The Buddha offers a number of ways to reflect on that. One is his description of the qualities of mindfulness. Then you have to bring it to mindfulness practice. As we were saying earlier today, the establishing of mindfulness is a skill. It’s an activity. There are three qualities you want to bring to it. One is mindfulness, two is ardency, and third is alertness. Mindfulness is simply the ability to keep something in mind. If you’re meditating on the breath, you keep the breath in mind. If you’re meditating on goodwill, you keep goodwill in mind. Just keep remembering that again and again and again. Every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out, this is where you want to be. Then there’s the quality of alertness, which means you keep checking on what you’re doing. Are you with the breath or are you not? When you’re with the breath, how does it feel? Does it feel comfortable? If it’s not comfortable, you’re not going to be able to stay. So you want to work on one end of the physical side. What kind of breathing would feel good just now? Just think. Ask that question to yourself. Ask the body, “What do you want?” Do you want long breathing, short breathing, deep, shallow? Many times, simply opening up that possibility, there are many different ways of breathing. The body will change its rhythm of breathing. You don’t have to exert any physical pressure on it. Just open up the possibility, and that gets the body out of any kind of mechanical feedback loop that it’s been on. Be alert to how the sensation of breathing feels. Where does it feel satisfying when you breathe in? Which part of the body feels refreshed by the breath? Other parts of the body feel refreshed by the breath, too. Watch. That’s where the ardency comes in. It’s not where you’re sitting or straining until bees of sweat pop out on our foreheads. Ardency means that you pay really close attention to what you’re doing. You try to be very, very sensitive to how the breathing feels. The more sensitive you are, the more the body’s going to feel refreshed by the breath. Another thing you want to be able to do is learn when the mind slips off. If you notice that it slips off, as soon as you’re aware of that, bring it back. Try to be alert to the warning signs that the mind is about to go. It’ll tell you. If you learn to look for the warning signs, you’ll see them. Sometimes there’s a bit of boredom. Sometimes the mind says, “Okay, enough of this. What’s next?” It’s almost like it’s extending its little pseudopod to find another place to land. Notice that and just let it go, because it’s not a pseudopod. It’s just a movement of energy. So these are the three qualities you want to bring to it. Mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. Another set of qualities that the Buddha talks about in developing skill are, as he said, success in the skill. Start with desire. Now, many times we think desire is a bad thing in Buddhism, but actually it has a very positive role to play in the path. The craving, as the Buddha says, is the cause of suffering. There are specifically three types of craving. There’s the craving for sensual satisfaction, the craving for becoming, and the craving for no becoming. Becoming, as we said this afternoon, is that process where the mind builds little worlds inside and then goes into them. You see that clearly in the meditation. As the mind slips off, it’s like that pseudopod is a bubble beginning to form, and then there’s a little pinching, and the bubble is independent and goes floating off someplace else. Then it pops, and you’re right back here. The craving for that kind of activity is a cause for suffering. The craving for no becoming means, basically, you’ve got to get out of a particular state and you don’t want it to change. You want to clamp down and everything. That’s a kind of craving, too, and that can cause suffering as well. So those are the kinds of cravings that the Buddha points out as things you want to avoid. The desire for the path here is the desire, basically, for happiness. A happiness that doesn’t change, a happiness that doesn’t turn on you. That’s a healthy part of the path. It’s a healthy desire to have. But without that, you can’t even do right effort. Part of the definition of right effort is that you generate desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. If you don’t have that desire, this just doesn’t happen. So you focus your desire for true happiness, not on something far away on the horizon, but the step where you are right now. What’s coming up in the mind? If it’s skillful, you want to encourage it. If it’s not skillful, you want to do what you can to drop it. So that desire is an important element of success in the practice. And it’s not a bad thing to think about success. It’s not a bad thing to have success. But if you don’t have goals in the path, if you didn’t have a goal, what are you doing here? There’s got to be a purpose in what you’re doing. It’s important that you be very clear about that. If you start denying that you have a goal, then your desire goes underground. And when it goes underground, it gets dangerous. It turns into the thing. It sneaks underground, suddenly pops up someplace else, infects you with its ability to be a little genetic germs, and then you turn into the thing. So it’s best to be open and upward about it. These are the desires you have. You want happiness. If you deny that, you’re really in denial. So take these things that are subconscious and bring them out into the light of day. Once they’re brought out into the light of day, the healthy ones will thrive. The unhealthy ones will shrivel and die. So be very clear about what kind of desire you want to encourage here and how important it is to have desire on the path, where it’s focused. As I said, it’s not on something off on the horizon. It’s on the next step. What’s right here, right now. Knowing that as you focus right here, right now, it’ll get you to the point on the horizon. The poor monks up here have heard this image many, many times. It’s like you’re going to a mountain on the horizon, and if you drive your car watching the mountain all the time, you’re going to drive into people, drive into trees, drive off the road. Once you’ve determined that this looks like a road that’s going to go to the mountain, you focus your attention on the road. And you check every now and then to make sure that the mountain isn’t suddenly appearing in your rearview mirror. But otherwise, you focus your attention right in front of you. And the road doesn’t lead you there, but by following the road you get there. So that’s desire. The next quality is persistence. That relates to ardency. As you really stick with it again and again and again, this practice that you’re doing, because if mindfulness is going to show you anything about the mind, if alertness is going to show you anything about the mind, you have to really stick with it. Otherwise, the really tricky parts of the mind hide themselves behind curtains and you don’t see. You fall into those gaps that are such a frequent part of the mind’s ordinary functioning. When a state of becoming is about to form, there’s this moment of unconsciousness. And if you want to see the forming of these states, you have to fight that moment of unconsciousness, which means you have to make your alertness and your mindfulness as continual as possible. That’s where ardency comes in, keeping them continuous. The next quality is intent. That relates to ardency as well, just being really totally focused on what you’re doing. The fourth quality is vimamsa. It’s hard to translate into English. The word is vimamsa in Pali. It means a lot of things. One is your ability to analyze what’s going on. If something is not working, the meditation is not working, you’ve got to look at it and figure it out. Or if it has worked, you want to figure it out as well. When it’s working, you don’t want to bother it too much while you’re doing it. But when you come out of concentration, stop and think for a while, “What did I do just now? How did I focus the mind? How did I stick with the object? What results did I get?” There are other times when you want to analyze it right while it’s happening, focusing the mind and the breath, and it doesn’t seem right. Okay, what’s wrong? Is it the way you’re focusing? Is it the way you’re breathing? Is there some subterranean issue that’s following you around or that you’re carrying around? Maybe you want to look into that first before you focus on the breath. Maybe you have some unfinished business. Maybe there’s something you did or said today that’s bothering you. That’s one of the best ways of learning the connection between meditation practice and the precepts. You say something that’s not true, you say something that’s divisive. You spend your time in a lot of idle chatter. That’s going to have an impact on your meditation. If you can see the connection, okay, you’ve learned something important. That’s the quality of analysis. But it also means your ability to come up with new ideas if things are not working. This is ingenuity. Because not everything is laid out in the text. As we noticed today when the Buddha talks about different issues that come up in the mind, he doesn’t lay them all out. He doesn’t define everything. He just says that there are problems that are going to come up in the mind, and you have to approach them with appropriate attention. Appropriate attention has a certain set of standards or a certain way of framing questions. You look for the stress, and then you look for the cause of the stress. And what could you do to let go of that cause? That’s the question or the set of questions that appropriate attention applies to things, whatever comes up in the mind. Learn to look at everything simply as an issue of stress, its cause, and the way to the ending of stress. Instead of getting tied up in ideas, “I’m a horrible meditator. I can never do this. Just put those thoughts aside. They’ve never helped anybody. Everybody’s taught them, but they’ve never helped anybody.” So reflect on your meditation, remembering these factors, the set of three, mindfulness, ardency, alertness, and the set of four, desire, persistence, intent, analysis. When things aren’t going well in your meditation, you can ask yourself, “Okay, which factor is not as healthy as it could be, as strong as it could be?” And do what you can to encourage it. This is an important part of developing discernment in the path. Discernment is not something that you can manufacture or that will come about simply by following a set of rules. It requires your full application of your attention, all your ingenuity in figuring things out on your own. That’s how you exercise it. We all bring some discernment to the practice, but it’s pretty weak. It’s just like your body. If you want to make it strong, you don’t go around waiting for a strong body to come. You have to exercise it, whatever body you’ve got. It means you put it to use. And in putting it to use, it gets stronger. Same with your discernment. You take what discernment you have and you exercise it, trying to figure out what’s going on in your mind. Figure out why the mind doesn’t settle down. Or when it does settle down, try to figure that one out, too. When the mind settles down, figure out how you can keep it there. Because the process of getting the mind centered on an object and then the process of keeping it there are two separate projects. They’re connected, but they’re different. You can take advice from other people, but you can also try to figure things out on your own. It’s not always that there’s going to be somebody there sitting next to you telling you, “Do this, do that.” You’ve got to learn how to observe your own mind. Develop higher and higher standards of what it means for the meditation to work. As you do that, your discernment gets exercised as well. You start seeing things that you didn’t see before, things that are there, that were hidden. But because you’ve exercised your discernment, developed these qualities of the mind, things become a lot clearer. That’s how this skill that we’re developing, leads to the results that we want.

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