Best Friends

November 18, 2005

When you read the Buddha’s descriptions of right concentration, you’ll notice that the two activities that get the mind to settle down are directed thought and evaluation. In order to clear away unskillful thoughts in the mind, you have to direct the mind to direct your thoughts in the right direction. That’s toward the breath. And you keep directing them there. Keep reminding yourself, “Stay with the breath, stay with the breath.” Just be with the body here in and of itself. You can just let any thought of the world drop away, but thoughts about the world can go out. The breath you encourage. And not just the breath. You also want to evaluate the breath as well. Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? Try to sensitize yourself as much as possible to the breathing energy in the body. Focus on any areas of the body where you can feel the breath coming in, the breath going out. Watch it for a while to see how it feels, whether it feels pleasant or not. If you’re not sure whether it’s pleasant, you can try adjusting the rhythm a little bit. That’s also a part of the evaluation. You can make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. There are lots of ways you can adjust the breath. And after a while, as you begin to see the range of possibilities, you can also begin to see which of the possibilities feels best right now. This is where your inner dialogue should focus. Reminding yourself to stay with the breath and just acquainting yourself with the breath, getting more and more familiar with it. It’s interesting to note that these two activities—directed thought and evaluation—are also the qualities that make up our internal dialogue. When the mind talks about something, first you direct your thoughts to a particular object, and then you evaluate the object, you make comments on it. What’s interesting is that a lot of that internal dialogue is a big problem, because there are all kinds of voices in there, all kinds of ways of conducting this dialogue inside. Some of them are fair and gentle, kind. Some of them are not. Some of them are harsh and destructive. We’ve picked up voices from who knows where—family, friends, teachers, the media. A lot of us come to the meditation hoping that we can snuff out those voices, because we’re tired of them. But trying to snuff them out sometimes just gets you involved in a worse dialogue. So what the Buddha has you do is learn to talk about new things in a new way. In other words, take these activities, which can be awfully problematic, and train them so that they’re actually useful. Keeping your thoughts on the breath helps to keep other thoughts at bay. Evaluating the breath makes the breath more and more attractive, more and more satisfying. And when the breath is satisfying, you’re less inclined to go wandering off and get yourself into trouble. The inner irritation that often makes the internal dialogue a nasty one doesn’t have any place to stand. When the breath feels really good coming in, feels really good going out, why would you want to get involved in a lot of unpleasant dialogues, a lot of unpleasant conversations? So in this way, you can take these inner voices and make them your friends. In other words, they’re friends who are helpful, who share in your sorrows and joys, like the chant we had just now. They point you to worthwhile things like the breath, and they’re sympathetic. Sympathetic doesn’t necessarily mean that they always say nice things. They can also tell you at times when you’re doing something wrong, but they do it in a way that’s helpful. And then after a while, you reach a point where you don’t need to do all this internal chatter. The breath gets as good as it can, given your physical situation right now, given your powers of concentration. Now you can just let it go and stay in the breath. In other words, you’re trying to develop, as Ajahn Lee says, a sense of full body awareness. When you think of spreading breath energy all throughout the body, and it’s a good breath energy, don’t go spreading things when they don’t feel good. Once you’ve got something good, then you can spread it. That makes the breath even more attractive, even more gratifying. So that when the internal chatter dies down, it’s not because you’ve stomped on it or tried to kill it. It’s simply because it doesn’t have much more to say. It’s like dealing with a hungry and irritable child. Give the child something good to eat and it’s going to be a lot less irritable. The irritable mind is irritable because it’s staying in an unpleasant place. The things it focuses on are unpleasant. So you give it better food. And you train the voices in your mind to be voices of genuine friends. So this internal dialogue becomes something that’s really beneficial. Once it’s beneficial, then you can let it go. A lot of times we come to the meditation wanting to snuff out ourselves. This is the self that we’re trying to snuff out. It’s this internal dialogue. But the Buddha says you have to train yourself. Don’t drop your sense of self too quick. In other words, develop the voices in the mind that are mature. Then know how to evaluate what’s a short-term happiness and what’s a long-term happiness. Know how to be responsible. These are all the signs of a mature sense of self. Once that mature sense of self has done what it can, then you can let it go. If you try to get rid of your immature self, that’s usually just an expression of aversion. You’re very unskillful self, a sense of self hiding behind it. This is a common pattern throughout the practice. You take the things in your mind that are problematic and you learn to train them. Directed thought evaluation, your sense of self, and you train them in the same way. In the direction of a better happiness. As they become more and more skilled at bringing that happiness about, then they perform their functions and they begin to get milder. When they drop their sense of self, they become more and more skillful. They drop away, not because you’ve stomped on them, but because they’ve done their duty. It’s a simple exercise we have here, just focusing on the breath, but it does a lot of good for the mind. It’s a very immediate way of showing goodwill for yourself. It’s a very immediate way of giving rise to a sense of well-being. Once you have that sense of well-being within the mind, then when you’re at the point of acting from that sense of well-being, you find that your actions are less harmful to yourself, less harmful to others, and you really do become your own best friend. Being a friend to yourself in this way does not mean that you’re selfish or uncaring of other people, because the qualities you develop to be your own best friend are also good qualities used in relationships with other people. So, as you’re training the mind, it’s good to back up and start with the real basics. Once the basics are in good order, everything that builds from them is going to be in good order as well.

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