Proving the Teachings

December 31, 2005

Get your body in position. Sit with your back straight, facing forward, eyes closed, with your hands in your lap. And then get the mind in position. Focus on the breath. Focus on the breath. Notice where you feel the in-breath, where you feel the out-breath, or the process of breathing. It doesn’t have to be the air coming in and out of the nose. Just what sensations are there in the body that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? Focus on those sensations and let them be comfortable. Don’t tighten them up. The breath is a wide-open process. The whole body breathes in, the whole body breathes out. It’s an energy flow. And the energy can flow in any way it wants to, any way that feels comfortable. You don’t have to force it in line with your preconceived notions of how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out. Just let it come in any old way it wants to, let it go out any old way it wants to. You just stay right there with the sensations as you feel them in the present moment. That’s called putting the mind in position. It’s not all that hard to put it in position. The hard part is getting it to stay. That requires mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is to just keep reminding yourself, “This is where you want to stay for the next hour, right here with the breath.” Then alertness is the process of actually watching the breath, watching the sensations, and also keeping watch over the mind, catching it when it wanders off and then bringing it back. In the beginning, keeping the mind in place basically means putting it back in place. It’s going to wander off, it’s going to slip off, it’s going to slide off, it’s going to forget itself. It can find itself thinking about New York City back in 1975 or whatever. The mind can create all kinds of little worlds for itself. What you’ve got to do is wake up. It’s like being in a little dream. Wake up and come back to the breath. Then don’t get discouraged. It’s normal that the mind is going to wander. You simply have to be determined. You’re going to train it the same way you would train a puppy to come. You have to use a combination of being strict with it but also being kind. In other words, as soon as you detect that the mind is going to wander, bring it right back. Don’t listen to any of its arguments that it’s got to think about this or it’s tired of the breath. If you’re tired of the breath, go ahead and die. You’ve got to breathe. This is the process that keeps the body and the mind together. It’s good to explore this process to see exactly what’s going on so you can get more out of it than just keeping the body alive. When you pay really close attention to the breath, you can find you can breathe in all kinds of ways that really are beneficial for the body and beneficial for the mind. You can breathe in ways that feel full and refreshing. When you’re tired, you can breathe in a way that gives you energy. When you’re tense, you can breathe in a way that relaxes you. When you’re upset, you can breathe in a way that calms you down. The breath has all kinds of uses if you explore it, if you take the time to get to know it. It’s like getting to know a person. You can’t just walk up and say hello and be friends and know that person thoroughly. It takes time. You have to take time. You also have to be observant. After a while, you get to know all the strengths and weaknesses of that person. It’s the same with the breath. If you spend time with the breath and you’re observant, you begin to notice certain ways of breathing are associated with comfortable states of mind, good states of mind. Other ways of breathing are associated with bad states of mind. You get all wound up in greed or lust or anger or delusion or fear. Sometimes the mental state is what creates the uncomfortable breath, and sometimes uncomfortable breathing creates a bad mental state. When you notice that, then you can start having more control over your mind simply by the way you breathe. It gives you a backdoor into getting some measure of control over the mind. This is the important issue in life, the fact that the mind is way out of control. This is the force that is the biggest force in our lives. It determines what we do, what we say, what we think. These, in turn, have a huge impact on the way our life goes, the happiness and the suffering we have. The fact that it has some people around us, it all comes out of the mind. Just by bringing the mind to be with the breath, you begin to see how little control you have over it, especially at the beginning. That should be disconcerting. Here it is, this force that could be used for a lot of happiness. When it’s out of your control, how can you guarantee that it’s going to work for happiness? In fact, that’s what the Buddhist noble truths are all about, that chant we had just now. That was his first sermon, the first topic he brought up. He said, “There is suffering in life, and it comes from craving.” We tend to blame our suffering on people outside, situations outside, but it actually doesn’t matter. Whatever the situation is, the reason it makes the mind suffer is because of the way the mind relates to it. All the effort we put into trying to make ourselves happy, yet the mind has a way of undermining it, sabotaging our efforts. This is why we need to gain more control. When you have more control over the mind, it doesn’t sabotage your efforts for happiness. You can actually train it and use it for the purpose of true happiness. That’s the message of the Four Noble Truths. You figure out the cause of the stress and suffering you’re causing, and you can undo that cause, bring it to an end. When you bring it to an end, you find that the only real problem in life was just this, the fact that the mind was creating suffering for itself, totally unnecessarily. The sense of ease, the sense of release that comes when you learn how to stop that suffering, that’s the ultimate happiness in life. It’s something you can do through your own efforts. That’s the message of the Buddha’s first teaching. That was how he began his teaching career. This is how you can begin to gain some control over your life. It’s just looking at your experience in these terms. It’s not the question of who did what to whom. It’s simply the issue of no matter what happens in the world, the human mind, when it’s not trained, when it’s not under control, it can create suffering out of any situation. But also, when it’s trained, when you bring it under control, intelligent control, you become a control freak. You become a control sage. You know how to control the mind skillfully. You can find happiness in any situation. It’s just this issue of how craving and ignorance give rise to suffering. It’s the suffering that really weighs us down. So start looking at your experience in those terms. The more you can bring the mind to stillness, the more easily you can see things in these terms. So, focus on the breath. As we’re breathing, you can focus on the breath. Bring the mind into the present moment as giving the mind a good place to stay from which you can see things very clearly. When you stay here, you begin to see the shape of your life in new ways and get out of the old narratives. “This person did that to me. That person did this to me.” It doesn’t really matter who did what to whom. It’s simply that there’s a process that keeps getting repeated in the present moment, just latching onto your experiences in a way that creates suffering. It doesn’t have to be that way. If you’re going to make a resolution for the new year, this is a good one to make. Just look at how your craving and ignorance is contributing. Look at your own suffering and what ways you can bring an end to that craving and ignorance. A lot of that ignorance is what we all think of as knowledge. You know this, you know that, but it gets in the way of seeing how things create stress and suffering. Our problem is that we tend to get very identified with a lot of our ideas. “These are my views. These are my opinions. This is my worldview.” Yet, when all these “my things” create suffering, why do you want to hold on to them? You have the choice. You can choose not to hold on to them. Many times we resist. We think, “If I don’t have these things I claim as mine, what am I going to have?” Other things to replace them. This issue of the four noble truths. Just learn to look at your experience in these terms. Stress, its cause, the activities that allow you to put an end to stress, and actually seeing stress end. Those qualities you need to see it end include mindfulness and alertness, what we’re practicing right now, and a sense of ardency. You keep at it. Really pay attention to what the mind is doing. Really get a sense of how your actions lead to pleasure or pain, stress or ease. We often don’t like to look at this. When we suffer, we don’t like to see the connection between what we just did and how we’re suffering. This is what keeps us in ignorance. When you can see the connection and you can see that the action you chose to do that was causing the suffering is something totally unnecessary, that’s when you have the chance to gain real knowledge, useful knowledge, knowledge that can change the habits of your mind. So tonight, New Year’s, which is a night for resolving on new beginnings, this is a useful new beginning to resolve on. You’re going to develop as much mindfulness and alertness as you can throughout the year. If you see yourself doing anything unskillful, stop. Anything that’s causing harm to yourself, anything that’s causing harm to other people. As soon as you detect that, stop. As you focus on that issue, then you’re able to get more and more sensitive to more subtle forms of harm and stress that you cause. And keep up the same process wherever you see it. If in your thoughts or your words or your deeds you’re causing any harm, causing any stress that’s unnecessary, just drop it. When you can do that, you find that your life takes a huge turn for the better. And you begin to see how many of the problems of your life were caused simply by the fact that you weren’t paying attention to what you were doing. You didn’t have control over your own mind. When you gain a measure of control, you begin to find that your life is a lot less of a burden. You can live with yourself. You don’t have to keep distracting yourself. The more easily you can stay with yourself in the present moment, the more you begin to see what’s really going on right here. And the more you can see that, it gives you even greater and greater opportunities for doing things skillfully. And the possibilities for happiness are more than you could imagine. It seems like such a tiny thing, the movement of the mind in the present moment. And yet the Buddha said, “Everything depends on that.” His teaching wasn’t a teaching about who created the universe in the past or where the universe is going to end in the future. He says, “The really important things you have to focus on are the little things happening in the present moment right now—the way you make a decision, the way you make a choice, the way the mind forms an intention and then acts on it. Everything hinges on that.” If those choices are made with ignorance and craving, you’re going to suffer. If they’re made with knowledge, and particularly the kind of knowledge that sees things in terms of cause and effect—skillful cause, unskillful cause—then good results, bad results. That’s the basic framework for these Four Noble Truths. When you can act in line with that kind of knowledge, it makes all the difference in the world. So the whole thrust of this teaching doesn’t place an emphasis on how things got started or how things are going to end in the future. The thrust is right here, in what may in the beginning seem like an unpromising ground, but it’s actually where everything gets decided. Everything that has an impact on your life gets started right here. So if you learn to take responsibility, learn to really focus on what’s going on right here, you can put an end to suffering, an end to stress. That’s a big promise, but it’s been backed up by 2,500 years of practice. People have taken this teaching, put it into practice, and found that it really gives the results. So check it out. See if you can prove it for yourself, because that’s the only way it can be proven.

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