Training in Happiness

September 4, 2006

Focus on your breath. Know when it’s coming in. Know when it’s going out. If you want, you can think the word butto along with the breath. But, in, to, out. And try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable. You can try long breathing for a while to see how that feels. And if it feels good, then stick with it. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. You can make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavy, light. There are lots of ways you can play with the breath. Think of this as a game. What kind of breathing feels good right now? And experiment to see what results you get. If your mind wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. As with any game, if you want to play it well, you have to really stick with it. What you’re doing here is important. It’s a basic skill you’re going to need. As the Buddha said, the most important issue in life is whether your mind is trained or not, because it’s only when the mind is trained that you can find real happiness. These are some of the qualities you need to train your mind so you can trust it. Make up your mind you’re going to stick with something, and then really stick with it. Make up your mind you’re going to pay attention to something, and you really pay attention, really observe, really watch. Don’t be a traitor. Don’t be a traitor to yourself. There are so many undependable things in life, and if your own mind is undependable, then you’re really in bad shape. That’s why the Buddha said the difference between a wise person and a foolish person is just this one issue. The wise person sees how important it is to train the mind. The foolish person doesn’t see it important at all. The foolish person looks for happiness other places. In all those other places, that’s a lot of the things we learn in school. Most of what we learn in school is basically how to gain the skills we’re going to need to make a living when we grow up. If you turn on the TV, look in a magazine or a newspaper, they basically tell you, “If you want to be happy, you have to buy this, buy that.” They encourage you to be greedy, to want more things, so you’ll work harder. But is that where real happiness lies? People can get really wealthy and they die miserable. Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha found that the secret to happiness didn’t lie in gaining things. It lied in training the mind. When your mind is trained, so it’s always in a good mood, always in good shape, then no matter where you are and no matter what you’ve got, you’re going to be happy. And it’s the kind of happiness that doesn’t change. It’s that kind of happiness that’s really worth working toward. So what he teaches is that you are the skills you’re going to need to be happy. When you think about it, that’s the most important issue in your life. If you’re popular, if you’re wealthy, but you’re not happy, it doesn’t mean anything. If you have a happiness that comes from within, from inside, then no matter what happens outside, you’re fine. So this is what we’re working on as we train the mind to stay with the breath. You develop mindfulness, that’s the ability to keep something in mind. And you develop alertness, the ability to watch, to observe, to see what’s really happening. Those two skills are basically every other skill you’re going to need in life. So it’s good to strengthen them. All the Buddhist teachings are aimed in this direction to find true happiness. And many times we’ll find happiness in places we didn’t expect it to begin with. For instance, he says you’re going to find happiness in generosity. As little kids, we were much happier to get than we were to give. But over time we’ve learned that when you give things to other people, there’s a happiness that comes. You feel good about yourself, you feel good about the other person, you feel good about what you did with that thing. An open hand is much easier to maintain than a clenched fist. We’ve also learned about the precepts. The Buddha, for instance, tells you not to lie. Sometimes we thought we should lie to get away with something so somebody wouldn’t punish us or somebody wouldn’t get mad at us. But over the long term, we learned that that didn’t work. We don’t feel good about ourselves, and we have to keep covering up the lie with more lies. It never ends. But if you always tell the truth, then you don’t have to worry about what lies you told to which person, because you’re always with the truth. Everything you say is true. There’s not going to be any contradiction. People don’t doubt you. People begin to trust your word. So if you give more value to your words, other people will give more value, too. So many times happiness lies in places we wouldn’t expect, in things in the beginning we didn’t like to do. This is why the mind needs to be trained, because often we’re pushed around by our likes and dislikes. But the problem is just because you like something doesn’t mean it’s going to make you happy. At the same time, things you don’t like, it’s not always the case that they’re going to make you happy. They’re going to make you miserable. So this is why we need to train the minds to remind ourselves that sometimes things we like are going to make us miserable, so we have to learn not to do those things. Figure out some way to talk yourself out of doing it. Or the things we don’t like to do but are going to make us happy. Figure out some way to make yourself happy to do them. That’s where real wisdom lies. Wisdom doesn’t lie in memorizing a lot of information. Or even spouting a lot of things that the Buddha said. Wisdom lies in learning how to manage your own mind. When you realize that meditating is going to make you happy, make the mind solid, trustworthy, reliable, then you learn how to talk yourself into wanting to meditate, even though part of you may say, “Gee, I don’t like this.” Remember, the mind is like a committee. Lots of voices in there. You don’t have to trust every voice that comes up. You have to look and see, “Is this a reliable voice? What’s speaking in here? Is it greed speaking? Is it laziness speaking? Or is it wisdom speaking?” Wisdom looks at things in terms of long-term happiness. The basic question wisdom asks is, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” So learn how to recognize that voice in your mind and learn how to strengthen it. Working with the breath is one way to strengthen it. You get practice in learning how to breathe in a way that feels good. You let that good feeling spread through your body, all the way out to your fingers, all the way out to your toes. Not only do you know that this is good for you, but it feels good. That makes it a lot easier to do it. When you can take that feeling and spread it through your body whenever you want, then even when things are difficult, things you don’t like to do but you know you really should do them, you try to breathe in a calm way. You try to breathe in a comfortable way while you’re doing them. It makes it a lot easier. In other words, you’re making new friends, new allies in your mind and in your body. Make the breath your friend. Sometimes when the breath is the enemy, that means when you get angry and your breath starts getting harsh and uncomfortable, you don’t feel right. You feel you’ve got to say something or do something to get out of your system. Doing something is something you’re going to regret later. So when anger comes, you learn to just try to consciously, for a few minutes, just breathe very comfortably. A comfortable breath will make it easier to think about what’s really the right thing to do here, so you don’t just act on your mood. What you want to do, you realize. Okay, what should you do? What’s the most skillful thing to do right then? That way your breath becomes your friend, and you learn to identify which voices in your mind are your true friends. Like in the chant just now, you’ve got true friends inside and you’ve got false friends inside as well. So the training is learning how to recognize which is which. This is why we need to train our minds. Because if we don’t, the mind is unreliable. It’ll go for what it likes and it doesn’t care about the long-term consequences. And it can destroy your own happiness. We all want happiness. And everything we do is for the sake of happiness. Yet many times we end up doing things that really make ourselves miserable. That’s because we’re not paying attention. We’re not looking for cause and effect. We haven’t trained our minds. So sometimes the mind gets traitorous. It undermines its happiness. So these are the skills you need in order to be truly happy. You’ll learn other things in school. You’ll learn other things from TV and magazines and newspapers. But the really important issues in life are what you’re going to do to be really happy. You have to learn it here. You have to develop the skills right here. Learning to be generous, learning to be virtuous, learning how to get the mind under control through meditation. That way, whatever you do really will lead to happiness—a true happiness, a happiness that’s good for you and good for the people around you. If your happiness depends on somebody else’s misery, they’re going to do what they can to destroy it. So when you’re looking at your happiness, you want to make sure you’re developing a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody else. And right here is the perfect way to do it. You just sit here and breathe. But you develop skill in your breathing. And that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else at all. And at the same time, when your mind is in better shape, the things you say to other people, the things you do to other people, are going to be much better things. So this is where true happiness lies in learning how to train your mind. So figure out some way to enjoy the training. After all, the Buddha said that not all the good parts of his path are saved for the end. It’s a good path to walk on. So learn how to enjoy being generous, to enjoy being virtuous, to enjoy meditating. Because that’s the secret to true happiness. (crickets chirping)

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