Independent Values

October 14, 2006

Let all your other thoughts and concerns just drop away for the time being. It’s time to give the mind some time to be its own self, not be pushed around by outside events. Focus on your breath. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out. Try to remember that. This quality is called mindfulness. Try to be with each breath. If you find yourself forgetting and wandering off, just come right back. To catch yourself that way requires another quality, which is called alertness. Watch over the breath to see how it feels, and watch over your mind to make sure it’s here. If it wanders off, bring it back. While you’re with the breath, try to be sensitive to how your breath feels. This way, you establish a foundation for yourself in the present moment. Because the mind that gets pushed around is a mind that doesn’t have a foundation. You try to find places for the mind to establish its happiness, but you find that they crumble away. You try wealth. Wealth doesn’t work. Relationships don’t work. They change. So the question is, where can the mind settle down to have a happiness that lasts? Well, the best place is right here in the present moment. Because if you try to establish a happiness based on the present, the present is gone. As for the future, it’s not here yet. So stay right here. Try to be at home right here. This means allowing the breath to be comfortable. If you notice that the way you’re breathing is not comfortable, you can change. You’ll find that some ways of breathing put you to sleep. Other ways of breathing make you tense and irritable. If you find that happening, change the rhythm of your breath so it feels just right. Not too long, not too short, not too deep, not too shallow. Experiment. Experiment a bit to see what feels best. Do your best to develop this foundation right here. When you have this foundation in the present moment, then you have some room for independence. You learn to make the mind more and more self-reliant, that it can find happiness inside. It doesn’t have to go depending on people outside. And it can find happiness out of the simplest things. If your happiness depends on a lot of money, that’s an insecure happiness. If it depends on having a lot of friends, that’s an insecure happiness. In other words, the more things that you’re dependent on, the more insecure your happiness. You’ll find that if there’s a way that you can develop a happiness that doesn’t require a lot, because that’s more and more secure. So this isn’t much here. It’s just the breath coming in and going out. It’s the very basic function of the body that’s alive. It keeps the body and mind together. You can develop a happiness based on that. You’re really in good shape because then you can go anywhere and you’ve got all you need for happiness. But as with any skill, it takes time. But also, as with any skill, the more skills you have, the more options you have. One of our problems as we grow up as human beings is that we sometimes have a very limited range of skills for dealing with pain, for dealing with disappointment, for dealing with change outside. We keep running through the same old approaches over and over again. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. The more skills you have, again, the better position you’re in. And the more you can learn how to make out of the breath, the better position you’re in as well. Because the breath is always with you. As long as you’re alive, it’s right here. And you’re perfectly free to breathe in any way you want. Nobody’s forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, and yet we often allow it to happen. Because we’re distracted and focusing our attention on other things. And so we don’t see the potential of the breath that really can feel like a soothing energy throughout the whole body. When the breath feels comfortable, think of that sense of comfort spreading out, seeping out, permeating the whole body. And then see if you can maintain that. It requires a sense of balance, though you’re not pushing it too much or you’re not pushing it too little. Just right. This may take time, but as with all good things, it’s time well spent. This way you become more self-reliant, more independent. The whole issue of true happiness lies around this ability to be independent, to be self-reliant. We’re talking today about what they call the topics of noble conversation. The first five, which create a system of values which is very different from the normal system of values in society, are designed to create just the right mental attitude. The first one is modesty. Society is all about modesty. The whole prize is people who are assertive and present a good portrait of themselves to other people. But when you’re modest, it’s based on the realization that what good you have is really your own business. Other people don’t have to know. So whatever good you have, it’s a good thing. Inside, you don’t have to go advertising it. So what good do you develop? One of the qualities is contentment. You look at whatever physical situation you’re in and you realize, “Okay, I’ve got enough to survive.” One way of developing contentment is learning to be generous. You give things away. That develops a sense of wealth, even with just a few things. That’s one of the big lessons I learned in Thailand. Sometimes I’d be on my alms round and someone would come running out of a little tiny grass shack with something to put in my bowl. You looked at the grass shack and it was just big enough for two people to lie down in. They didn’t have much, but they had enough to spare. That comes from a certain attitude, contentment, realizing that what you’ve got is plenty enough. Especially nowadays, when people have more and more things, you begin to see that the more things you have, the more you weigh down. So if you can learn how to develop a sense of contentment, you don’t have to spend so much time working to amass money. You have more time for yourself, more time to develop the mind. Again, you get used to finding happiness in ways that don’t depend on material things. You cultivate the mind instead. The third topic is seclusion, finding some time to be by yourself, to get away from the values of other people and to see what your values are, what’s important to you. It’s only when you get the clamor of other people’s voices out of your ears that you begin to see what’s clamoring inside your mind. Then you can start sorting it out. The mind has all kinds of attitudes that you’ve picked up from outside, from other people, from your past experiences. You’ve got to sort out which ones you really believe in and which ones you don’t. Otherwise, these influences can work on you even when you’re far away from other people. So again, having the mind centered on the breath is a good place to be. Spend all your time in your thoughts. It’s just like winds blowing around. This wind blows south, that wind blows north. You’re just pushed around up in the sky like clouds. But if you’ve found a good, solid place on the earth, in other words, got some grounding in the body, then you can watch those thoughts. They go north, they go south, but you don’t have to go north and south with them. You can stand right here and watch and see where you want to go. Do you want to go north? Do you want to go south? You’ve got the choice. You’ve got to put your mind in a place where it really does have choices. You realize what the choices are, and you can see where they’re going to lead, and you realize you can make the choice. You’re in a much better position. You’re much more in control. Then there’s the principle of non-entanglement. Oftentimes we see relationships as being opportunities, but a lot of times they just tie you down, tie you down, tie you down, and you find yourself with less and less and less room to maneuver. And so you learn to deal with those situations. You learn to deal with other people in ways that you can help them, but you don’t have to get entangled. That’s an important skill. It’s when you find thoughts arising in your mind that will entangle you. You say, “I don’t need that right now.” And it’s an important value. It’s an important principle. Although often society stresses being entangled, being involved with other people, getting entangled with them, is somehow the meaning of life. But those entanglements can get very, very confining, and they give you less and less room actually to do good. In the meanwhile, the mind gets confined and it gets less and less self-reliant. So when the really big issues of life come up, how are you going to deal with aging? How are you going to deal with illness? How are you going to deal with death? When these things come up, the people you’re entangled with cannot share the pain of the illness. They can’t hold your hand. Even if they do physically hold your hand, they can’t help you through the process of dying. Worse, you’ve developed the mental skills that deal with how the mind moves from one mental world to the next. You’ve got the skills that you need. When you practice meditation, it’s not just a matter of learning a technique. It’s also learning a set of values. The fifth value is persistence in developing good qualities in the mind and abandoning unskillful qualities in the mind and teaching yourself how to enjoy this. Most of us like our unskillful qualities. We like our greed. We like our anger. We’re comfortable in our delusion. Yet those are precisely the things that cause us suffering. When you realize this, you develop an attitude where you’re willing to let go of these things. You see through them. You see that they have some attraction, but they also have lots of drawbacks. And you learn to balance the attractions against the drawbacks and see which way is heavier. Because you have an alternative, you don’t have to follow with them. As long as you don’t have that alternative, you can’t see any way out. This is why so many people think, “What would life be like without greed, anger, and delusion? It sounds like it’s like porridge without any salt.” So the Buddha doesn’t say, “Totally abandon them right now.” He says, “Learn some other skills, some other ways of relating to the mind, relating to the whole issue of happiness, and then make the comparison.” You find that the sense of ease and well-being that comes from getting the mind centered and still, seeing what’s going on in the mind very clearly, is a much more satisfying sense of well-being. It’s not insipid at all. So as you meditate, try to cultivate these attitudes in the mind as well. So you can resist the influences that come from outside. Being a meditator is like having your own personal culture that’s a little bit different from the culture outside, which sometimes may seem alienating and may seem lonely. But when you look at the culture outside and you see how screwed up its values are, you realize, “Okay, this is your safe haven, and it’s not a bad thing.” It’s a good thing to have your own separate culture, your own separate idea of what’s really important in life, together with the skills that enable you to maintain that separate culture and find true happiness within it. You can imagine people sitting around talking about modesty. What a good thing it is to be modest, talking about the fewness of wants. How happy you are to be content with what you’ve got. Talking about seclusion, non-entanglement, putting an effort into developing a mind. It doesn’t look at all the way people normally talk in this society. Most people wouldn’t be able to do it at all, much less like it. Yet that’s how you have to learn how to talk to your own mind. You realize, as you talk to yourself in that way, you develop those attitudes that the mind develops in inner strength. You’re encouraging yourself to be more self-reliant, to find a true happiness that doesn’t depend on things outside, that doesn’t believe in a message of society, which is basically a message to abide, abide, abide. Don’t be content with what you’ve got. Be more assertive. Get involved. Get entangled. Don’t worry about developing your mind. We’ll have all kinds of products that will keep you happy. That kind of message keeps the economy going, but it turns people into something less than people. They’re just consumers, just salesmen. Learning to be a meditator is what makes you a real human being, a complete human being. Because as you meditate, you start developing a really strong sense of inner worth, inner dependence, independent from things outside. Someone with a really good, strong foundation. So work on this foundation, because you’ll find that as you stick with it, it can develop a happiness that goes a lot deeper and is a lot more gratifying than anything you could imagine.

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