Exercising the Mind

November 4, 2006

OK, get your body in position. Try to find a stable posture that you can hold for an hour. Place your hands on your face straight ahead and close your eyes. Try to keep your back comfortably straight. That’s getting the body in position. Then you get the mind into position. We’ve already started with thoughts of goodwill. “May all beings be happy, and may I be happy.” Tell yourself that. “May I be happy. May I find true happiness.” Don’t be embarrassed to think that. After all, true happiness is not a selfish thing, because it comes from within. It doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else. So it’s not harmful. Only if you can have some measure of happiness inside can you help other people be happy in a genuine way. This is both for yourself and for the people around you. The next step is to wish well-being for all beings. May all living beings be happy. Remind yourself this is why you’re meditating, because if you can find true happiness, you’re not going to be causing anybody any misery, anybody any harm. So this is your motivation, goodwill. These are good thoughts to think. The mind is imbued with goodwill. It doesn’t wish for anybody’s harm, and it can let down a lot of its resentments and angers. Other uncomfortable emotions, you can put them aside for the time being. You may not uproot them, but at least you can put them aside. Remind yourself that there’s nobody in the world whose suffering would benefit you in any way. So there’s no need to wish anyone ill will. When you can maintain that attitude, your mind feels a lot better. It’s a lot lighter, more spacious. That’s the beginning step in getting the mind in position. The next step is to think about what you’ve got here in the present moment, these resources that you’ve got here that you’re going to try to develop for the sake of true happiness. It may not seem like much. You’ve got the body sitting or breathing. You’ve got your mind thinking and aware. But when you bring those things together, they turn into something more. So think about the breath, and be aware of how the breath feels as it comes in and as it goes out. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with the breath. You can think bhutto, which means “awake.” Bhutto, with the in-breath. Tho, with the out-breath. Or any word that you find helpful. Once you can stay, though, with the sensation of the breathing, then you can let the meditation word go and try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, what kind of breathing feels comfortable right now. When you breathe in, what’s the point? It lets you know you’ve breathed in enough, and now you can breathe out. And again, when you’ve breathed out, what’s the point? What’s the sensation of the body? It says, “Okay, enough out-breathing. Now it’s time for an in-breath.” Try to be sensitive to those turning points. If you want, you can spend the whole hour just focusing on that one issue. How do you know when the breath is comfortable? How do you know when you’ve breathed enough in one direction or the other? Because what we’re doing here as we meditate is not just working on the breath, but we’re developing the mind. And that’s the important part of the meditation, the qualities that you develop as you develop and as you focus on the breath. The more you exercise mindfulness and alertness, the stronger they get. It’s like going down to the gym and exercising. You may work with the weights, but you’re not there because you are really into the weights. It’s because you want strength. So you focus on learning how to lift properly, or whatever it is your exercise is. Try to do it in a proper form. Be very mindful so you can get the most out of the exercise. And then you’ve got some strength to take home. It’s not that you leave the strength there in the locker room. It’s the same with meditation. As you focus on the breath, you’re not just learning how to be a good breather, you’re learning how to be more mindful. You’re more alert. Those are the qualities that you want to develop. But you focus on the breath in order to do that. And you develop a third quality as well, which is called ardency. You really stick with what you’re doing. Pay a lot of attention. Try to be quick in noticing when the mind slips off. Why did it slip off? What distracted it? In the beginning, you don’t want to analyze it too much. As soon as you sense that the mind has slipped off, just bring it back. We talked today about the problem of meditating for an hour. You have the luxury of a whole hour for the mind to be free to think about whatever it wants to think about. You say, “Okay, I’ll settle down by the end of the hour. In the meantime, I can think about this, think about that, and then you start getting lazy and sloppy.” That doesn’t develop the qualities you want. You have to bring an attitude of ardency to what you’re doing. So as soon as you’ve noticed that the mind has slipped off, bring it right back. If it slips off again, bring it back again. Don’t give up. It’s like training a puppy. You don’t want the puppy making messes on the floor, so you have to be strict with it. And it’s going to rebel. It’s not going to be happy. But you have to ask yourself, “Do you want the puppy to be happy now, or do you want to be miserable with its messes for the rest of your life?” You’ve got to train it to have a sense of the importance of what you’re doing here. If your mind is not well trained, it can make a mess of everything in your life, no matter what good things come your way. If you’re not mindful and alert, you can actually use them to harm yourself. You gain wealth, you gain status, you gain money, you gain praise. And you can kill yourself with those things. In other words, you can kill the goodness of the mind. So this is the most important thing that you have to work with in your life, the attitude that the mind brings to things, the qualities that it brings to what it’s going to do and say and think. For that, you need to be mindful. You need to be alert. And to learn from experience what’s skillful and what’s not. This is some practice in how to do this. What’s a comfortable way of breathing right now? Here’s something that’s so close to the mind, the sensation of the breath in the body. And do you know when the breath is comfortable? Do you know when it’s as comfortable as it could be? If you can’t know your own breath, if you can’t have a sense of what’s a skillful way of breathing and what’s not, how are you going to be skillful in other areas? So even though it may not seem like much, focusing on the breath develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. You start with mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. You start developing concentration and discernment. If you really are ardent and being mindful and alert, the mind is going to start staying more and more consistently with the breath, and it can begin to relax with the breath. All too often, the mind is like a cat that jumps here and jumps there, and if it knows it’s going to jump, it tenses up. The mind instinctively knows that it moves around so quickly that it’s almost always tense. It lands on something, and almost as soon as it lands there, it’s ready to go someplace else. If you find that you can stay with the breath more and more consistently, the mind can begin to relax with the breath, kind of melt into the breath. In other words, your awareness begins to seep throughout the whole body, just as your sensation of the breath begins to seep through the whole body, and you feel more and more at home. You develop a sense of steadiness. It’s this steadiness of mind that’s right concentration, or the beginning of right concentration. As you develop skill in maintaining that sense of steady but relaxed focus, that’s the beginning of discernment. You begin to see what works, what doesn’t work, how you can develop that sense of focus, how you can maintain it, how you can destroy it. Over time, you develop knowledge through doing the work of the concentration. This is an important part of the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha doesn’t simply want you to memorize words or to deal in concepts. He says you want the kind of knowledge that comes from doing, i.e., the knowledge that comes from developing a skill. That knowledge goes deep and can make changes in your life. It can make changes in your mind. Simply knowing the words and knowing the concepts doesn’t necessarily do. In fact, it really can’t do, because you can replace any concept with another concept. It’s simply a matter of words. It may give you a slightly different perspective on things, but it’s not the kind of knowledge that comes from knowing that you’ve done something and you’ve either suffered from it or haven’t suffered from it, or you’ve been able to lift a burden from the mind by doing something in a particular way. That kind of knowledge sticks with you and goes deep. This is why this simple process of focusing on the breath really is related to the issue of true happiness. You gain knowledge of mindfulness and alertness by developing them. You gain knowledge of concentration. You gain knowledge of the question of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful by working at these things. Your knowledge becomes skill knowledge. In the old days, they used to make a distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribes could describe all kinds of things, write about all kinds of things. Whereas warriors, their knowledge didn’t come in terms of definition. It came more in terms of skills, how you deal with a particular situation. How you can survive a particular situation. How you can win out in a particular situation. What we’re doing as we meditate here is developing warrior knowledge. It doesn’t simply mean that you go out and just attack everything. It means you have a sense of what issues are important to work on and which ones are not. Which battles are worth fighting and which ones are not. The battle of training the mind, winning out over greed, anger, and delusion. The qualities that get in the way of mindfulness, alertness, and discernment. That’s the most important battle in life. So as you’re working with the breath, remind yourself, “These are important skills. These are things that you’re developing.” And you never know how much time you have to do it. I think we have a whole hour to meditate, or a whole week here at the monastery, two weeks, whatever. But time can get cut short very easily. Aging, illness, and death. Don’t send messages ahead of time saying that they’re going to come. So you’ve got this moment right now. Make the most of it. If you get another moment, make the most of that. Keep with it moment by moment by moment. And you’ll find that the skills you need, the strengths you need, the understanding you need, will develop right here.

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