Evaluation

February 2, 2007

The Buddha once said the most important quality for awakening is something called “appropriate attention.” Notice that’s not “bare attention,” but “appropriate attention.” What it means is bringing a certain way of looking at things to the present moment. You apply the categories of the four noble truths. You look for where there may be some stress or suffering. And then you look for the cause. And you remind yourself that there is a way to put an end to that suffering. Or you can work on the path that leads to that end. Those are the four things you look for. Once you find any of them, there’s a duty associated with each. If you see there’s any stress or suffering, you try to comprehend it. If you can ferret out the cause, you let it go. Letting go here means that you realize that there’s something you’re doing, and so you stop doing whatever it is that’s causing the stress. If you see any mental qualities that are helpful, you’re trying to develop them so that you can come to witness for yourself that there is an end to stress and suffering. These are the “shoulds” that you follow in meditation. What this means is there’s not just one thing you do in the present moment. You look for cause and effect, basically. You look for skillful causes and desirable effects, and for unskillful causes and undesirable effects. The stress is the undesirable effect. Craving is the unskillful cause. The path we’re following is the skillful cause. We’re working on a skill here. This means that you do have to think about what you’re doing. We mentioned this this afternoon. You try to bring the mind to stillness. You don’t just force it down. You focus on an object and then see if it’s working or not, the same way you develop any skill. You try something and you check the results. You try to be as sensitive as possible to what you’re doing so that if you see the results aren’t good, you have an idea of what you might want to change. In the factors of concentration, this is called evaluation. Try breathing in long and out long for a while and see how it feels. If it feels good, that’s your evaluation. Then you stick with it. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. In other words, you’re seeing stress right here in the breath, or its absence right here in the breath. You try to adjust things accordingly. Once things are going well, then you try to maintain it. In other words, when you find the proper balance, the question then is, how do you maintain that balance? Again, it’s a skill. It takes time. It’s like riding a surfboard. You can get up on the board and, hey, you’re on the board, you’re on the wave, and then you fall down. The next skill is learning how to sense. Whether you’re maintaining your balance or not, and if you find yourself losing your balance, what you can do in order to correct things so you can ride the breath. It’s useful when you meditate to think back on skills that you have developed so you get a good idea of how just to get started and then how to become more and more skillful and then how to maintain. A sense of balance when you get a feel for things. This is why evaluation is such an important part of the meditation. You check on your progress to see where it’s skillful, where it’s not. This can mean checking both the breath and the mind. What you might want to do to adjust the breath, and also what you might want to do to adjust the mind. The breath is not just a physical process. It has a lot of mental elements as well. It’s one of the few bodily processes that are both automatic and willed. The willed part depends on your perception. How you perceive the breath. If you find yourself struggling to breathe, maybe you need to reconsider how you perceive the breath, what labels you put on things, exactly which sensations are breath sensations, and which parts of the body are the parts that are pulling the breath in. Actually, the motion of the body itself can be seen as part of the breath element. Your basic experience of the body comes through the breath. Without the breath, you wouldn’t sense the body at all. So if it feels like there’s a blockage in the body, maybe you can change your perception to see, “Well, is this blockage actually an aspect of breath energy that you’ve been fighting and forcing into a mold that’s not quite right for it?” This involves an act of the imagination, thinking of other ways of perceiving. It’s good to reflect on how arbitrary our perceptions can be. We’ve picked up certain ways of labeling things because they seem to work for our purposes. But now we have a new purpose, establishing a home with the breath, establishing a sense of belonging in the present moment. We’re going to need a new set of perceptions. Again, it’s like learning any skill. There’s a vocabulary that goes along with a skill. To master the skill, you have to master the vocabulary. It’s not just a matter of memorizing words, but applying the words to your actual experience. So you’re evaluating both the physical side of the meditation, which is the breath, and the mental side, the perceptions and feelings that are related to the breath. All of these things come under the category of what’s called fabrication. Breath is the bodily fabrication. It’s the force that influences all the other processes in the body, directed thought and perception, where you focus the mind on a topic and then you evaluate it. That’s called verbal fabrication. It’s how the mind chatters to itself. Then there’s mental fabrication, which are feelings and perceptions. In the Buddha’s analysis of how we give rise to suffering, fabrication is the factor that follows immediately on ignorance. In other words, if you breathe in ignorance, even your breathing can be a cause for suffering and stress. If you chatter to yourself in ignorance, that can be a cause for suffering and stress. Even the way you relate to your feelings and perceptions, if it’s done in ignorance, that can be a cause for suffering and stress. But if you do these things with awareness, that helps to cut through. In other words, awareness of the fact that you’ve got these different things that are happening in the present moment, these different things to look out for. The Buddha never said there’s just one thing to do in the present moment. There are four different things you can do. Part of the skill is figuring out which experiences in the present moment are the wisest ones to focus on right now and then what to do with them. So you have to use your powers of evaluation. It’s only through using your powers of evaluation that you begin to gain your own insights. We’re not trying to clone a particular way of seeing things. If someone were to tell you that if you could see the whole world as blue, you would gain awakening, you could probably force yourself, ultimately, to see the whole world as blue. But that would mean that the world is blue. It’s simply that you wanted to clone the idea of awakening. What we’re doing here is giving you a way to look at the present moment, to develop skill in the present moment, to refine your own powers of observation. It’s through your own observation that discernment arises. And these are the categories. Stress, its cause, cessation of stress, and the path to the cessation of stress. So as you sit down to meditate, remember to keep the awareness of the these categories in mind. There are times when you want to focus on one of the tasks. Say, when a state of ease gets going, you want to develop that. You want to focus all your attention on the developing of that state. Try to keep the general framework someplace in the back of your mind. So when things aren’t going well, you can back off a little bit, look at the situation, and see what else you might have to do. What is there to comprehend? What is there to let go? What is there to develop? What is there to realize? When you apply these categories to your experience, that’s when your own insight begins to arise, gets sharpened. Instead of trying to clone awakening, you just peel away the stress, peel away this unnecessary suffering you’re causing in the present moment. Ultimately, when it all gets peeled away, then you see what’s left.

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