How to See for Yourself

March 4, 2007

We start each group meditation session with that chant on thoughts of goodwill, a wish for happiness, a wish for true happiness, your own happiness, the happiness of everyone else. Because that’s the attitude we want to bring to the meditation. Meditation is work. It takes energy. It takes time. It takes a lot of dedication. But you want to do the work with an attitude of goodwill, to remember that for all the work that goes into it, it’s basically for happiness. It’s not like so much of the work of the world, which is just plain old work, a lot of drudgery, work that often actually harms people, the people who do the work, the people who are affected by the work. The work here, though, is work in developing a sense of well-being inside. The Buddha’s instructions on concentration remind you that you’re trying to develop a sense of ease, even a sense of rapture, fullness, refreshment. So, as we meditate, it’s a way to show goodwill for ourselves right here, right now. There are patches of the path which are difficult, but there are also patches which have a great sense of ease and well-being. Start by focusing on the breath. The breath can come in and out of the body in lots of ways. Allow it to come in and out in a way that feels comfortable. You can ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would the body like right now?” Sometimes when it’s tired, it wants a way of breathing that’s energizing, or a way of breathing that’s energizing would feel really good. When you’re tense, tight, you want a way of breathing that’s more relaxing, that opens up the tightness in the body, so you don’t go around in circles. And with your muscles clenched all the time. Think of the breath as bathing you in the body, around the body, because the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole flow of energy in the body. If that energy is allowed to flow freely, it can take away a lot of the tension and tightness in the body right there. So you’re trying to create a good place for the mind to stay. There will be times when you find that as you try to explore the breath, you can work yourself into a corner. After all, this is a skill. It takes time to observe which ways of breathing are right and which time for the body. And it’s possible sometimes that you, instead of making things better, actually make things worse. That’s when the Buddha says, “Drop the breath for a while and try to think about something you find inspiring, like thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion.” Some people like to think about the Buddha, what he represents, the ability of a human being to find true happiness through his dedication. And we’re lucky we have his teachings still around. Without their example, it would be hard to find the path for ourselves. Someone I know once said, “Suppose you got all the great physicists of the twentieth century and put them in a room. Would any of them come up with the idea that simply sitting here and watching your breathing would be the way to true happiness?” It’s an unusual insight, but the Buddha’s example is compelling. So if you find that inspiring, think about that. Any topic related to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha that you find inspiring can help give a sense of refreshment to the mind. Once you’ve got that sense of refreshment, then bring that sense of refreshment back to the breath. Then try to keep tabs on the mind so that once it has that sense of ease, it doesn’t throw it away. All too often, we relax a little bit and then the mind goes off to its old ways. This is the part of the meditation that’s work. In other words, you’ve got to learn new habits. To develop a sense of ease, you have to learn how to maintain that sense of ease. You don’t want to throw it away. It means that you have to be vigilant, you have to be mindful, alert. That’s the work part of the meditation. But when you learn how to combine the work with a sense of ease, then the meditation begins to become a skill, and it can form the foundation for even deeper insights into the mind. The Buddha said that concentration practice can be used simply for a sense of well-being here and now. And that right there is not to be sniffed at. If you can tap into a sense of well-being when you’re meditating, you need it. It changes your relationship to other kinds of happiness as well, because so many times we go for sensual pleasures that may not be all that skillful, but we go because we can’t see any other alternative to the pain that we carry around within us. But when you can develop this sense of ease simply by the way you relate to the breath, it changes the balance of power in the mind. A lot of those sensual pleasures that seem so compelling and so necessary that you couldn’t live without them, you begin to realize you can live very well without them. You can live better without them, because you’ve got something even better inside. You’ve developed this skill. Concentration can also be used for gaining insight into how the mind creates suffering for itself, because it gives you a good, solid place from which you can stand and watch. It’s like the difference between standing and looking at a tree and running past it. Most of our lives are spent in running past. We catch a few glimpses here and there. Then our knowledge is like connecting the dots. We have a dot here and a dot there, and we connect the dots with our imagination. So many times the dots are so random that you could make almost any shape out of them. Which we often do. If you want to know that your knowledge is really secure, really reliable, you have to stand still and watch to see how things are connected in and of themselves, rather than simply trying to piece together your little glimpses that you’ve caught running past things. You’ve got to stand still. When you stand still, you can see things a lot more clearly. If you’re looking at a tree, you can notice all the details and the bark and the leaves and the flowers. The veins of the leaves, the pattern of the bark. You can really get down to the details. It’s the same with the mind. You really want to understand the mind. You’ve got to get down to the details. How the mind moves, which ways in which it moves are skillful, which ways are not. This is why we need to get the mind in a good state of concentration, so it can see these things clearly. The Buddha tells us to trust our own perceptions. But if your perceptions were already trustworthy, you wouldn’t need the Buddha to tell you that. The problem is that our perceptions are often very contradictory. One day we have an intuition that says, “Go left.” Another day we have an intuition that says, “Go right.” Sometimes in the same moment, one side of the mind says, “Left.” Another side of the mind says, “Right.” If it weren’t for this conflict within, we wouldn’t need to go outside. And even then, there are times when there’s no conflict in the mind, but it conflicts with reality. This doesn’t mean we have to go blindly believing people outside, because their advice conflicts as well. What we have to learn how to do is learn how to make our own perceptions reliable, so we can be our own mainstay. So we try to find wise people and take them as an example. Learn their skills, and gradually our own powers of perception will grow clearer, more trustworthy, more reliable. Do we really can depend on ourselves? It’s a gradual process we’re working on here. This is why it requires lots of goodwill, because it’s so easy to get frustrated. Who would like so very much for us to be able to just sit down and have sudden insights in which all the secrets of reality are suddenly made clear? If that were possible, the Buddha would have taught that as a path. But it’s not. What we’re trying to learn here is to see reality in the reality of our actions, cause and effect. That may seem mundane, but it’s how we sharpen our perception. We keep our perception focused on areas that we can know for sure. Things outside of our own actions, our own intentions, are hard to know. Much of that outside knowledge is based on concepts. We all know how much concepts are shaped by our culture and by our own personal backgrounds. But we can watch the movements of our own mind. That’s something we can watch directly, and then we can see. Does it lead to suffering and harm, or does it lead to well-being and ease? That’s something we can watch and we can know for ourselves. The irony, though, is that it’s something so close that we overlook it, and our powers of perception have been dulled. They need to be trained, largely by learning how to be mindful, alert, learning how to get the mind so it can be still, still enough to really look at things. It’s like a scientist. If your equipment is standing on a table that wobbles, you can’t trust the readings you get from your equipment. You’ve got to have a table that’s really solid, strong. Then your readings are more trustworthy. The same way with the mind. If you want to understand your own mind, you’ve got to get the mind to be still, both because it’s easier to observe the mind when it’s still, and also because it’s in a better position to observe. This is what we work on, creating greater and greater stillness in the mind. As the mind grows still, your insights will develop in proportion to the stillness. So even though the path may not be as quick as we’d like it to be, it does lead to true happiness. It’s meant to be a path that includes some happiness along the way. It’s not one of those paths that saves all of its glories for the end point. You can develop a sense of ease, well-being, simply by sitting here, meditating, and then taking that attitude of wanting to do things skillfully, wanting to watch things skillfully throughout your life. That gives you a good basis for looking at things. It can lead to a greater sense of well-being, stability within the mind. So it’s a path of well-being that leads to an even greater well-being. So even though it may involve more work than we’d like sometimes, always try to keep this attitude in mind that the work is worth it. The essence of wisdom is when you see what, when you do it, leads to your long-term welfare and happiness, and your willingness to sacrifice short-term gains for long-term gains that are more reliable. It may sound pedestrian, but it works.

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