A Special Time

August 6, 2007

When you sit down to meditate, keep reminding yourself that this is a special time. Give full attention to the training of the mind. It is important that you regard the whole rest of the day as an opportunity to train the mind as well. In other words, try to keep the mind centered. Keep watch over the mind in the midst of your other activities. This is an important part of training the mind, developing good qualities in the mind. But still, the time you sit down and close your eyes, it’s really special. Give your full attention to what you’re doing, full attention to the mind itself, full attention to the breath. Remind yourself that this is an important activity, training the mind. The Buddha made the point that this is the main difference between a wise person and a fool, realizing that the mind needs to be trained. The happiness you want in life comes from training the mind. If the mind isn’t trained, then all the other good things you gain in life could actually lead to suffering. In other words, you gain something good, but your thinking runs out of control. You decide that your happiness depends on that thing or that person or that relationship or whatever. Of course, you realize deep down inside that that thing or that person or relationship is impermanent. It’s going to change. So immediately there’s a sense of worry, a sense of possessiveness. There’s a desire to fix the situation in such a way that your happiness won’t be undercut. As we’ve seen over and over, both in our own lives and in the lives of the people around us, the more that people scramble around trying to create situations or circumstances so that they will be happy, the more they undercut their own happiness. As long as that happiness is dependent on something outside. But if the mind is trained, then no matter how bad things can get outside, it still has its own inner source of happiness. The training here means developing good qualities in the mind, letting go of unskillful qualities. So we begin with something simple, like staying with the breath, as a way of developing two very important qualities, mindfulness and alertness, together with the ardency that develops the mindfulness and develops the alertness. In other words, you try to keep the breath in mind. That’s what the meaning of mindfulness is, the ability to remember something. Keep it in mind so you don’t forget. In this case, it’s reminding yourself to stay with the breath no matter what. Other things will come up, other thoughts, memories, anticipations. You have to keep reminding yourself, “No, don’t go there. Stay with the breath.” And then there’s alertness, the ability to watch what you’re doing. To see your intentions, and then to see how you act on your intentions, and then to see the results of those actions and intentions. Ardency is what keeps you with these things. In other words, when you notice that you’ve forgotten the breath, you come right back. When you notice that you’re not paying attention, you focus your attention again. When you are focused, when you are paying attention to the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels. This way you develop two other qualities which are important for concentration. One is directed thought. In other words, you keep thinking about what you’re doing, you’re actively engaged, and you evaluate how things are going. This is how the mind settles in. Sometimes we think that meditation means not thinking, but actually what it means is learning how to use your thinking in a skillful way, especially in the beginning stages as you evaluate the breath, evaluate the way you’re relating to the breath. You try to figure out which spot in the body is the best one to focus on, what kind of rhythm of breathing is best for the body right now. You’ve been thinking about how you conceive the breath. There are lots of different ways of picturing the breath to yourself. One of the most effective for getting the mind into the present moment, into your body right here, right now, is to think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole energy flow in the body that runs along. Not only brings the air into the lungs and lets it go out, but also the energy that runs along the bloodstream, the energy that runs in your nerves, all the way out to every pore of your skin. That’s breath as well. So you’re dealing with your whole experience in the body as you breathe here. There are different nodes of this energy system in the body, like the middle of the head, right at the palate, or at the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, the spot just above the navel. These are spots where the breath energy seems to radiate from. So you can choose any of those as beginning spots to focus on, and then see how it goes. If you’ve got the right spot, you’re applying just the right amount of pressure. In other words, not too much, not too little. If it’s too much, things get stiff and constricted in the body. If it’s too little, the mind just kind of floats away. That’s the right amount of pressure, and the right way of conceiving what you’re doing, conceiving the breath. As you evaluate these things, see what works and what doesn’t work, this is how meditation becomes a skill. In the Canon, the Buddha uses a lot of analogies to describe the meditation process, drawn from skills. It’s like being a cook who learns how to observe what his master likes to eat, what he doesn’t like to eat, and will adjust his foods accordingly. In the same way, you have to think about feeding the mind with breath energy. What kind of energy flow would feel most nourishing right now? Sometimes the Buddha would compare a good meditator to an archer, able to shoot long distances, fire arrows in rapid succession, and pierce great masses. In other words, be really penetrating in your perception, your understanding of what you’re doing, and be very quick to notice when the mind has slipped off and bring it right back. Often it’s useful to think about skills that you’ve developed, especially manual skills, like cooking or carpentry or any kind of sport. Think about the attitude you brought to developing the skill, and which attitudes worked and which ones didn’t. In other words, it’s got to be the desire to do this, but also you can’t let the desire get so overwhelming that it actually gets in the way of being able to observe what’s working and what’s not working. So keep your desire well focused, be persistent, give this your full attention, and analyze what you’re doing so that you can see what’s working and what’s not. Then use your ingenuity to figure out things that will work. When you find that what you’re doing is not working well, what could you do to change it? These are all qualities you want to develop in the meditation, and as you exercise them in the meditation, they become stronger. So you can then use them in other areas of your life as well. So this is a special time to work directly on the mind, directly on the qualities of the mind, the skillful qualities of the mind. They’ll help develop that sense of inner well-being, inner ease, inner pleasure, that can grow into a happiness that’s really independent of things outside. So remember to treat this as a special time. It’s not a time to think about what you’re going to do tomorrow or what you did today. You can think of those things at any time. But here’s an idealistic time to work directly on the mind. Let the mind let down all of its other burdens so it can focus directly on its own inner qualities. Treat this time with respect, because the qualities you develop here can play a huge role in providing you with the foundation for the happiness that you want in the rest of your life. So respect your desire for true happiness. Respect the practice as you’re doing it. Because without that respect, your opportunity for true happiness is going to slip away.

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