Be Observant

August 14, 2007

Breathe in comfortably. Breathe out comfortably. Focus on the sensation of breathing anywhere in the body that feels convenient, that feels natural for you to stay focused on. Some people find it natural to stay focused on the nose, others at the chest, at the abdomen. Focus anywhere where there’s a sensation that tells you, “Now you’re breathing in, now you’re breathing out.” Allow that sensation to be comfortable. You may have to experiment a little bit with the breathing. Try long breathing to begin with. See how that feels. If it feels comfortable, stick with it. If not, you can change. In long, out short. In short, out long. In short, out short. Deep, shallow, heavy, light. Notice to see what rhythm and texture the breathing feels best. And there’s nobody who’s going to tell you that you’re right or wrong. You have to notice for yourself. This is an important principle in the practice, that we meditate to develop our powers of observation. Because all the truths we need to discover for the sake of true happiness are right here. It’s simply that we don’t notice them. And the reason we don’t notice them is because we’re not very observant. So you want to develop your powers of observation. You start with the breath because the breath is nearby. And the movements of the breath are more obvious than the movements of the mind. Ultimately, you’re going to want to turn around and look at the mind itself. But the mind is extremely subtle and fast. So you’re going to practice first with things that are a little bit slower, more blatant. Try to see where you force the breath in ways that are uncomfortable. A lot of us have some old habits in our breathing process that may not be the best for the body or the best for the mind. So try to observe. When you breathe in, breathe out, how do you decide whether the breath is long enough or too long or too short? And when you breathe in, when you intentionally breathe in, what do you think you’re doing? Where does the breath start? Where does it stop? Which muscles are the ones that actually bring the breath in? Explore your assumptions and you may change them. In other words, look for the slowest breath. Find the slightest sense of dis-ease or discomfort that you can find in the breath, and then see what you can do to change so that dis-ease or discomfort will go away. This is an important principle in the practice. We’re looking for happiness, but we’re focusing on dis-ease and discomfort. The Buddha’s first topic in his very first Dharma talk was stress and suffering. It may seem strange. We are looking for happiness, and we have that chant on aging, illness, and death—separation. But it’s not really strange. There are actually two ways of looking for happiness. One is to pretend that there isn’t any suffering. Try to look at the world in a way that the suffering goes away or doesn’t matter. And the other way is to pretend to look squarely at the suffering to see why it’s there. When you see why it’s there, then you can let go of the cause. When you think about it, it’s the second approach that makes more sense. Because no matter how much you want to dress up aging, illness, and death with flowers and other nice things, it’s still aging, illness, and death. It’s still miserable. If you don’t believe it, go ahead and go to an old folk’s home and see what happens when people grow older. It’s not like a flower withering. The flower withering doesn’t feel anything. But when people grow old, they start losing their faculties, losing control over their bodies. It’s really miserable. You can be with someone as they die, and you see how miserable that is, the idea that life would have to end in this way. So the test is, can you find a happiness that can maintain its solidity in the face of that? That’s the happiness that you can trust, the happiness that depends on dressing things up. Assure for a fall. So you want to look into yourself to see what ways you’re choosing your thoughts, your words, your deeds that actually lead to suffering. Can you change your ways, change your assumptions, change the way you do things so that the mind can be free from suffering? One of the Buddha’s important insights is that even though there is the stress of change, aging, illness, and death, the mind doesn’t have to suffer from these things as long as it doesn’t hang on. It learns how not to hang on. First, it learns how to hang on intelligently. In other words, you hang on to things as the path rather than as ends in themselves. In other words, you don’t identify with the body. You don’t identify with your thoughts. In other words, just because a thought comes into your mind doesn’t mean it has to be your thought or you have to run with it. You have your choice. It’s the same with the body. You have your choice of doing something or not doing it, particularly how you relate to pains in the body, feelings of stress in the mind. You don’t deny that they’re there, but then at the same time, you don’t have to pull them in. To learn this skill, you have to be very observant. This is why the Buddha said that the path is not a sudden one. It’s like the continental shelf off of India. It slopes very gradually. It goes out for a long ways before there’s the sudden drop-off. In the same way, the practice is a gradual practice before there’s the insight of awakening, the knowledge of someone who’s totally awakened. The reason for that is that, again, it’s not a matter of seeing something or knowing something, being told something that will make all the difference in your life. The path we’re practicing is a skill. Skills take time. You have to be observant and you have to learn from what you’ve observed. Gradually, over time, the skill gets more and more precise. Your powers of observation get better and better. You see precisely where you’re causing stress, and you don’t have to. The word for insight or discernment doesn’t mean learning a general truth about things. It means seeing very precisely, seeing the distinctions. For instance, there may be a pain in the body, but you also see that if there’s suffering in the mind, the two are two different things, and they’re caused in different ways. The pain in the body may be a natural part of having a body, but the suffering in the mind is not necessary. You have to be able to make this distinction. This is why the Buddha has us look very carefully at things that arise and pass away, so you can see precisely what’s arising and what’s passing away. What depends on what, and which parts are optional. In particular, you want to see that the stress and suffering are optional. So this requires very subtle powers of observation, which can be developed. You see connections, you see distinctions. This requires that you look very, very carefully. So, take the time to watch what you’re doing. Start with the breath, and eventually the breath becomes a mirror for the mind. As you adjust the breath, and as you start to develop a sense of ease, allow that sense of ease to spread through the body. Develop the potentials for happiness that you have here, because you’re going to need them as part of your path. So much of the path requires looking at things that you’d rather not look at. We like to look at the flowers, we like to look at the mountains, but here we are looking at our breath to see where there’s stress. In particular, we’re learning to see where we’ve made lots of false assumptions, or to put it in very simple terms, where we’ve been stupid and unobservant. Nobody likes to see those things. So to put yourself in the right mood to see them, try to breathe in a way that allows a sense of pleasure to suffuse throughout the whole body, all the way down through the nerves, through the blood vessels, out to the pores of the skin, all around the body. There are ways of breathing and of relating to the breath that allow you to do that. So try to be observant. Learn what those ways are, because they’ll put you in a position where you can look very carefully at where the real cause of stress and suffering is, where the real pain in life is. So you can look at it and not run away from it. You can look at it and understand it, comprehend it. Once you’ve comprehended it, then you can learn how to let it go. So instead of running away from the suffering, you face it square on, and you see right through it. The happiness that comes from that is a happiness you can depend on. It’s a happiness that won’t let you down. you

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