Doing, Maintaining, Using

October 15, 2007

In very broad terms, there are three stages to the meditation. The first is learning how to do it. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is learning how to put it to use. Each of them has its own issues. The doing is something simple. It’s not necessarily easy, but it is simple. You focus on your breath, and then you stay there. What makes it hard is the fact that the mind is not used to staying in one place. It likes to move around a lot. So you’ve got to find ways of getting it to stay. One is by allowing it to be comfortable. The breath, when you’re not watching it, just comes in and out every which way. But take some time to notice what kind of breathing really feels good for the body right now. You can focus on the body in any one spot—tip of the nose, middle of the chest, at the abdomen. Those are three main spots, but there are a lot of other spots in the body where you might be able to notice that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. So try to find any one spot that seems congenial for you to stay focused on. Watch the feeling of the breath right there. Try not to pinch or put too much pressure on that spot. Try not to tense up around it. Allow the spot to be open and relaxed. When you do that, you’ll notice that different breathings of the breath either are helpful in maintaining that sense of relaxation or actually get in the way. So adjust the rhythm of the breathing so that it maintains that sense of relaxation in that one spot that you’ve chosen. If the mind slips off again, bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged, but you’re here. You mean business. You’re not here to think about this, that, or the other thing, what you did last week, what you’re going to do next week. You’re here to get the mind to learn how to stay with one thing consistently. This is going to require that you develop your mindfulness and your alertness and your ardency. These are three qualities that are mentioned in the Suttana Sutta. Establishing mindfulness. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, remembering the breath. Remembering that you want to stay with the breath. Alertness means noticing what’s actually happening. How does the breath feel? Is it coming in? Is it going out? Is it comfortable? Is it not comfortable? Are you staying with the breath? Is the mind with the breath? Is it about to leave the breath, or is it already gone? Ardency means wanting to do these things well, wanting to keep your mindfulness consistent, keep your alertness consistent. If you find yourself wandering off, you immediately want to come back. And you want to come back in a skillful way. If you come back in anger or frustration, the mind’s not going to stay. So try to find a calmer way of bringing the mind back. Quickly, when you’re with the breath, try to figure out ways of relating to the breath that are skillful. This is where ardency comes in, while you’re with the breath. Using your ingenuity, using your desire. Desire does have a role in the meditation, after all. If you didn’t have the desire, you wouldn’t be here doing it. So learn how to use your desire skillfully. Learn how to use your energy skillfully. If you use too much force, the breath is going to get uncomfortable and the mind is going to rebel. If you use too little force, things are going to slip apart. The mind will go one way, the breath will go another way, and nothing gets developed. Learn how to adjust your desire so that it’s helpful. Adjust your level of energy so that it’s helpful. And adjust your powers of analysis so that they’re helpful as well. If you don’t do any analysis at all, you’re not really noticing what’s working and what’s not working. You don’t use your ingenuity. Things don’t go anywhere. If you sit here overanalyzing things, you may never be able to get to settle down with the breath. So you’ve got to experiment to see what kind of desire is useful and which is too little, too much. What kind of energy is useful? Too little, too much. And to what extent is it helpful? Experiment. Your powers of analysis are either too little or too much. Try to bring things to a balance and then try to stay there. That’s the doing. Maintaining is of two sorts. One is maintaining this focus throughout the hour, and the other is maintaining it throughout your day. This means reminding yourself of why it’s good to stick with this for long periods of time. We’re not here just to prove that we can do it. We want to remind ourselves that the meditation is a really useful activity. But for it to have a real impact on the mind, you’ve got to stick with it. It’s like a medicine that you put on your skin to cure a disease. If you just put the medicine on the skin and then wipe it off, the medicine doesn’t have a chance to heal the rash. You’ve got to let it stay there for a long period of time. So you’ve got to develop patience. Results may not come immediately, and it may seem like you’re just stupid, sitting there not thinking about anything. But actually, you’re learning a skill. You’re learning persistence. You’re learning truthfulness. Once you’ve made up your mind, you’re going to stay here. You really stick with that intention. All of these are perfections, pardon me, that you want to develop. Or you can think of it as like physical exercise. It’s not enough just to go out and exercise once and say, “Okay, I’ve done that.” You have to keep doing it consistently for the body to stay healthy. A similar principle applies while you’re trying to maintain the meditation throughout life. This means really balancing the meditation with your day-to-day activities. You want to use the meditation as a spot from which you come when you act. If you just think of it as one more thing you’ve got to do in the course of the day, it gets burdensome. But if you remind yourself that as you act, as you think, as you speak, you have to be coming from someplace. So come from a position of being mindful, being centered in the body. If you think of this as juggling, the breath meditation is not one of the balls you juggle in the air. It’s actually the place where you stand. And if you’re standing on something solid, it’s easier to juggle. So you want to bring the meditation into your daily life, because it will have an impact. This brings us to the third aspect of the meditation, which is learning to put it to use. One is, as you maintain your focus in the course of the day, you’re bound to see the parts of the mind that pull away. That, right in and of itself, is an important insight. You begin to see where your personal issues are, which things spark your greed, which things spark your anger, which things are still surrounded by delusion. These things are easier to notice if you’re staying with the breath. When anger begins to arise in the mind, for instance, it’s going to have a change in the breath. There’ll be a catch in the breath. There’ll be a tightness, say, in the chest or in the stomach. If you’re sensitive to the breath, you’ll notice that immediately. If you’re not, these emotions can arise very easily, and you miss them until they’re full-blown, until they’ve already taken over the committee and are running the show. But if you’re staying with the breath, you can sense them in the very beginning stages. You can breathe through the tension, and that helps to alleviate at least the physical sense of frustration around the anger. Then what you’re left with is the mental side, and you can deal with it a lot more easily when you don’t have that physical sense that you’ve got to get it out of your system. There are other uses for the meditation as well. When you’re sick, you find that meditation helps get you through the illness a lot more easily. It gives you a place to focus so you’re not focused on the pain or focused on the question, “How much longer is it going to last? How much is this really going to harm your body?” Or, as you get older, “Is this a sign that you’re never going to recover from this particular illness? Is it going to plague you for the rest of your life?” Instead of focusing on those questions, you focus simply on how is the breath right now. Give the mind a good place to stay where it can maintain its stance of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. As we all know, if your mind is in better shape, it helps the body through the illness. So you’re not compounding the problem and actually helping the healing process along. So we’re doing the meditation not just simply to prove that we can do it, but to realize that there’s a use for this. There’s a use for concentration. There’s a use for mindfulness. There’s a use for discernment. It can overcome all the issues of suffering that we create for ourselves in life. But it needs all three stages. Simply being able to do it when you’re on retreat is not enough. You have to be able to maintain it in different circumstances. This is one of the reasons why here at the monastery we don’t have absolute silence all the time. You need practice in learning how to maintain your center even while you’re talking, even while you’re doing other jobs. Even while you’re interacting with people in a relatively harmless environment. So that when you go out to the more harmful environments outside, you’ve had some practice in integrating your meditation with other activities in life. And then realizing that the whole worth of the meditation is how you can use it. Again, it’s like exercising the body. If you simply get the body strong but then don’t use that strength for any positive purpose, it’s an exercise in vanity. But if you realize, “Okay, this strength is useful. I can use it to lift things. I can use it to help people in various ways,” then you begin to realize why this is important. And it’s a more complete training. We’re not just here to master a technique, but also to learn how we are creating suffering in unnecessary ways, both for ourselves and for the people around us. How can we learn to undo those habits? For the suffering that really matters in life is the suffering that we create unnecessarily, through our greed, through our anger, through our delusion. Once we stop creating that kind of suffering, there’s nothing that touches the mind at all. It experiences the world, but it’s with a sense of being disjoined. In other words, you’re not suffering from the world. You’re not a slave to the world. You’re not oppressed by the world any longer. That’s what the meditation can do if you carry it through all of its stages. Keep this in mind. Simply doing the meditation is not enough. You’ve got to have a sense of heedfulness to realize that there are important issues in life that have to be dealt with. Aging, illness, and death don’t just play around. When they come, they mean business. So when you meditate, you have to mean business as well. You need to develop the skills that you’re going to need in order to face these things so you don’t build up a lot of unnecessary suffering around the fact that you’re going to grow old, get ill, die. The meditation can do this. Nothing else can. So you realize it. Try to keep uncomplacent. Keep heedful. And you get the most use out of the meditation. You get a real sense of the benefits that it can offer. you

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