Basic Stuff

November 19, 2007

When you meditate, you want to get your mind in position and your body in position. First the body, face straight ahead. Place your hands on your lap and close your eyes. That’s it. That’s the easy part. The harder part, of course, is going to be maintaining this position. But try to sit comfortably. And then get your mind in position. Tell yourself, “May I be happy.” We had that reflection just now that life is full of aging, illness, and death, and they’re unavoidable. There’s also separation. That’s unavoidable. Our opportunity for happiness lies in our own actions. Where do actions come from? They come from the mind. If the mind is well-trained, then the things you do and say and think are actually going to lead to happiness. If it’s not trained, they tend to lead to suffering. This is one of the big paradoxes in life, that we all act out of the desire for happiness. Many times, the things we do lead to unhappiness. They lead to suffering. That’s because we’re ignorant of what actually leads to happiness. This is why we have to meditate, to get rid of the mind’s ignorance, to make it more alert, more aware, to understand the principles of happiness better, which means that we also have to understand the principles of suffering, why people suffer. You can’t solve a problem without digging to the cause and then eliminating the cause. If you try to eliminate just the effects while you’re still doing the causes, it’s not going to work. So the cause here is ignorance, lack of awareness. We try to make ourselves more aware of what’s going on in the mind. Because it’s hard to focus directly on the mind to begin with, we’re going to focus on the breath. Because of all the things in the world that are close to the mind, that’s the closest. So be aware of the breath when it comes in, be aware of the breath when it goes out. You can focus on the sensation of breathing anywhere in the body at all. It can be at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, either the actual passage of air through the nose or through the movement of the chest and the abdomen as you breathe in, breathe out. Choose an area of the body that’s congested with genial. It feels comfortable to stay focused there. Try to make your focus just right. If you clamp down too hard on things, it’s going to make the breath uncomfortable and you’re not going to want to stay. If your focus is too loose and casual, it’s going to go wandering off. The image they give in the texts is of a person holding a baby chick in his hand. If you squeeze the chick too tightly, it’s going to die. If you grasp it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So hold it just right, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Try to find what kind of rhythm and texture of breathing feels best right now. If you’re feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re feeling tense and stressed out, you may want to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. But keep tabs on what feels best, because sometimes it’ll change. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with the breath as a way of helping you stay with it. You can think “buddho,” like “buddwing,” in the in-breath, “buddho” means “awake.” That’s the kind of quality you’re trying to develop here. So as you stay with the breath, you actually find several things are going on at once. You’re being mindful. In other words, you’re remembering to stay with the breath. And you’re being alert to watch what’s actually going on, how the breath feels, whether the mind is still with the breath or not. You’ve got to keep check on that, too, because sometimes it wanders off without you realizing what happened. If you catch the mind wandering off, bring it right back. If you catch it wandering off again, bring it back again. No matter how many times it wanders off, keep bringing it back. Don’t get discouraged. After all, you are training the mind in new habits. So it’s going to take a while. And just the simple fact that you can’t stay on the breath should give you a strong sense of urgency in when to do the practice. Because if you can’t control your own mind, what can you control in life? So try to develop mindfulness by keeping the breath in mind. You can develop alertness by watching over the breath, watching over the mind. And then there’s a third quality called ardhansi, which means you really do this with your full attention and you try to do it as well as you can. In other words, when you catch the mind wandering off, you bring it right back. You don’t wait. You don’t say, “Well, I’ve got a whole hour here. It doesn’t matter. I can wander around for five minutes.” That doesn’t train the mind in new habits. It just allows it to follow its old habits. So when the mind is wandering off, thinking about something else, you can just drop whatever that something else is in mid-sentence. You don’t have to complete the thought. You don’t have to tuck in the set edges. Just drop the thought unfinished and come back to the breath. While you’re with the breath, try to breathe as comfortably as you can. It is possible to breathe in such a way that feels really gratifying, really refreshing. The fact that the mind is wandered off shows that you haven’t gotten as much out of the breath as you could. So try to explore the breathing process a little bit more. Make yourself really sensitive to how the breath feels and think about how you might make it feel more comfortable, allowing it to be longer or letting it be shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Think of the breath as a whole body process, because it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the energy flowing through the whole body. So when you breathe in, try to notice where there’s tension in the body, in the arms, in the legs, in the shoulders, in the back. When you breathe out, notice where you’re holding on to tension. Then try to breathe in such a way that you can breathe in without creating tension. You’re creating new tension, and you can breathe out, allowing any tension that’s already there to dissolve away. When you’re thinking this way, you realize there’s a lot to explore in the body right now. There’s a lot to explore in the process of the breathing. That helps keep you interested in the breath. As long as you’re with the breath, you’re in the present moment and you’re very close to your own mind. You begin to see that there’s a lot to explore. The effect that comfortable breathing has on the mind can soothe a lot of the mind’s frazzled edges. When the mind feels soothed and comfortable, then it’s more likely to act in a skillful way. Sometimes you notice that the mind affects the breath. In other words, when there’s a sudden thought of anger or a thought of fear, there’ll be a catch in the breath. It may be in your chest or in your stomach. When you sense that, allow that tightness to relax. Think of the breath dissolving it away. In this way, the breath is both a mirror for the mind and also a means of having some control over which thoughts you’re going to follow and which thoughts you’re not. You begin to see that you have more of a choice than you thought. So many times we simply act on impulse. A thought pops into the mind. It comes out the mouth. An idea of something you want to do comes into the mind before you’ve even thought about it. You’re already acting on it. That’s why we suffer so much in life. We don’t think about cause and effect. We don’t stop and realize we have the choice not to act, even when there’s a very strong impulse. We’re afraid that if we don’t act, we’ll get all this negative energy bottled up inside us and then it’ll turn into the thing and go underground and create a lot of problems. But it doesn’t have to be that way. When an impulse to do something unskillful seems to build up in the body, think of your breath coming in and dissolving that bodily sensation away. Then you can actually look at the thought behind it. This is something you really want to do. Where is it going to lead? What kind of results do you anticipate? This is the beginning step in learning to have some control over your mind, your thoughts, your words, your deeds, and developing skill in all your actions. This is how we work toward happiness. Happiness isn’t something that just comes floating by randomly. It comes from our actions, just as suffering comes from our actions. We may think that things outside cause us to suffer, but it’s the way we get worked up about them that actually causes us to suffer, which means you have to turn around and really look at your mind and put yourself in a position where you have more control over what you’re actually going to do or say or think. The breath is the means by which you get a handle on the mind, so you’re not just a victim of your old habits. You begin to realize you have choices. When you’re coming from a greater sense of ease in the body and clarity in the mind, you’re more likely to make the right choices. That’s the beginning principle in wisdom. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That’s the question that leads to wisdom. On the one hand, it shows that you realize your happiness depends on your own actions, and two, that long-term happiness is better than short-term, because short-term turns on you. Short-term happiness is like a snake. You obviously don’t want to grab hold of the snake in its mouth, but most of us say, “Well, there’s no mouth on the tail, so we grab hold of the tail.” Of course, what happens? It’s all part of the same snake, so it turns around and bites us. That’s what short-term happiness does. It turns into something else, and when it turns into something else, it doesn’t turn into more happiness or pleasure. It turns into pain, suffering. Long-term happiness doesn’t have any teeth. It can’t bite you. It doesn’t want to bite you. So that’s the kind of happiness you want. You realize that it comes from your actions. This is where wisdom begins. Then you need strategies and techniques to help bolster your wisdom so it can overcome your old habits. This is why we work back to the breath, because this is where all our actions come from. As I said, it’s the one thing you can know that’s closest to knowing your own mind. You learn how to use the breath as an ally in learning to become wise. Skillful. So that principle, “All beings are the owners of their actions,” will lead to happiness. Even though there is aging, illness, death, and separation in life, they don’t have to make you suffer. If you learn how to train the mind to have mindfulness, alertness, clarity around these issues, you realize that even though there is aging in life, the mind doesn’t have to age. There’s illness, but the mind doesn’t have to be ill. There’s death, but the mind doesn’t die. There may be separation, but the mind doesn’t get separated from its good qualities. So you want to invest in the mind as much as possible. Make your mind as skillful as possible. And that’s the path to true happiness.

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