Training the Mind

May 9, 2008

Sit straight, face straight ahead, place your hands in your lap, and close your eyes. That’s called getting the body in position. The mind is in position. Focus on the sensation of your breathing. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? It might be the sensation of the air coming in and out of the nose, the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of your abdomen. Notice where the sensation of the breathing seems clearest, and stay there. Stay with that sensation all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then with the next breath, and then the next breath. Just keep that up. That’s all you have to do for the whole hour. It’s staying focused that’s going to take some time to master, because the mind has a tendency to wander off. You get bored with the breath, and you go someplace else. But you want to remind yourself that you’re here to train the mind, because your happiness depends on having the mind well-trained. But if you simply force it, it’s not going to want to stay. So use a strategy. Try to breathe comfortably. Notice what way of breathing feels best right now. If you’re feeling tired, what kind of breathing gives you more energy? If you’re feeling tense, what kind of breathing relaxes you? If you’re getting sleepy, what kind of breathing wakes you up? In other words, the best way to stay in the present moment is to look at it as an opportunity to learn something, to explore. Nobody else can answer these questions for you. Here’s your opportunity to learn some important skills. How to create a sense of well-being inside that doesn’t require buying anything or asking anything from anyone else. It’s something you can create on your own, and it doesn’t have any drawbacks. The sense of pleasure that comes as you learn how to modulate your breathing is something the Buddha said is blameless. You’re not taking anything away from anyone else. You’re not harming anybody. And unlike most of the pleasures of the world, you’re not intoxicating the mind. A lot of pleasures, especially the really intense, sensual pleasures, actually make the mind more narrow, constricted, dull. It may seem exciting, but the actual quality of your awareness gets very tight, very small. Many times, those pleasures are actually harmful to yourself, harmful to other people, but we don’t like to look at the harm because we’re so stuck on the pleasure. It means we learn how to blind ourselves. When the mind is blind like this, you can’t call it a well-trained mind. It’s a drugged mind. It’s an intoxicated mind. Even if you’re not drunk on liquor, it’s drunk on the pleasure. So here you’ve got a pleasure, a possibility for pleasure, simply through the way you breathe. And it’s a pleasure that actually clarifies the mind. You’re not harming anyone, so you don’t have to lie to yourself about the pleasure. When the mind doesn’t have to lie to itself, it can begin to open up. And when you feel a sense of well-being in the present moment, then the things you don’t like to admit to yourself about yourself become a lot easier to admit. So this way you learn more about the mind because it opens up. And this way you begin to see how the mind pursues the things it likes, the things it wants, whether it’s a person or a job, a new car, a new house, a new whatever. You see that that doesn’t really lead to happiness. Because if the mind is not trained, no matter how good things get outside, you can still create suffering around them, either because you don’t get what you want or when you do get them, you have to hold on to them. Your anger, your delusion, all the things that can cause a lot of harm. But when you train the mind with a sense of well-being that comes simply from sitting here breathing, learning about the breath, asking yourself again and again, “What kind of breath does the body want right now? What would feel really good right now?” When you create a sense of well-being inside like this, then you’re training the mind to let go. It’s a lot easier to see the drawbacks of outside things. It’s a lot easier to see the drawbacks of things inside as well. If greed comes up, if anger comes up, lust, fear, whatever, you see their drawbacks immediately. You see the harm they do. You get more and more interested in figuring them out. Why do they come? How could you let go of them? When you learn how to let go of these things, first you let go in fits and starts, but after a while it becomes more and more easy, more and more second nature, that when these things arise you don’t want to go with them and you know how not to go with them. That’s when you find that wherever you go, you can be happy. Your happiness doesn’t need to depend on things outside being a certain way. That’s why the Buddha said it’s the training of the mind that leads to happiness. It just doesn’t mean that you give up on the world or you’re not interested in helping the world. It means simply that you don’t grasp so much at your particular idea of what helping the world might be. You are in a position to actually really give genuine help to the world. The traditional pattern is that you develop generosity and then you develop virtue and then you work on your meditation. But in actuality, they help each other along. When you learn how to meditate and the mind calms down, it’s a lot easier to be generous. It’s a lot easier to be harmless. Generosity doesn’t simply mean giving money or material things. It means giving help, giving aid in any way at all, giving your energy, giving your time. Virtue means that you’re not harming anyone. You abstain from abusing other people. You abstain from harming them in any way. The Buddha doesn’t talk about our obligations to help other people. It’s interesting to note that aside from the obligations that we owe to our parents, the Buddha doesn’t talk about our relationships with other people in terms of obligations. He points out that it’s wise not to be harmful, because after all, if your happiness depends on harming other people, they’re not going to stand for it. So if you want your happiness to last, you have to think of other people’s well-being and, at the very least, you don’t want to harm them. If you want to go beyond not harming, then that’s an area of generosity. If you see someone who could use your help and you feel inspired to help them, go right ahead. That’s generosity. It’s your choice. The Buddha never talks in terms of obligations. He once asked him, “Where should a gift be given?” A gift here could mean a material gift or it could mean a gift of help, a gift of energy, a gift of knowledge. The Buddha said, “Wherever your mind feels inspired.” It’s your free choice. You’re not bound by obligations. You’re open to the whole world of areas that you might help because you want to. And that’s to be encouraged. And it’s easier to want to when you’re coming from a position of well-being. So that’s why the meditation helps the generosity. And it helps your virtue. So all these qualities work together to make you a happier human being, to make it easier for you to help other people to be happy as well. So this simple skill that we’re trying to develop here, of learning how to keep the mind here in the present moment, is not simply for stress reduction or to be quiet and rest a little bit. It’s part of a larger project of really training the mind so it can find a genuine happiness. And if you feel inspired, you can help share that happiness with other people. At the very least, you learn how not to harm them. By learning a happiness that comes from within, you don’t have to take so much from other people. You don’t have to feed on them. You learn how to feed inside instead. And when you feel well-fed, then it’s easier to share what you’ve got with other people. So think of this practice as part of a larger training. A training that leads to a larger happiness within you and all around you. And this world is full of so many people. All they can think about is, “Where can I get my fix? Where can I get my next hit of pleasure?” And look at what we do to each other. What it needs is more people who can find their sense of well-being, find their sense of happiness inside. And in that way, they make the world a much better place.

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