The Conditions for Knowledge

September 23, 2008

The purpose of the chanting before the meditation is to remind you of why you’re here. We’re all looking for a true happiness, a happiness that takes into consideration the happiness of others as well, that doesn’t interfere with their happiness and allows them to find true happiness too. And the chant on karma, or actions, reminds us that happiness is something that comes from our actions. It doesn’t come just floating by. We have to learn how to act in skillful ways. Because happiness comes from knowledge. If you go through life acting in unskillful ways, you don’t really gain any knowledge. You may get information out of books, but even then you have to pay careful attention. If you’re going to remember the information properly, then you have to pay careful attention to what you’re doing to see if you’re putting that information into use in the proper way. We suffer because of our ignorance. The end of suffering comes from knowledge, so we’re trying to create the conditions for knowledge. The chant we had just now on the Noble Eightfold Path gives a whole set of conditions for how you can give rise to the knowledge that can free you from suffering. Some of the conditions involve your day-to-day actions—the things you do, the things you say, the way you make your livelihood. Because if you act and speak in harmful ways, if your livelihood depends on harming others, you tend to deny the fact. And wherever there’s denial, there’s ignorance. So you want to behave in a harmless and aboveboard manner. And then you want to steady the mind. That’s what the last three factors of the path are about—the right effort trying to get rid of unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones, qualities like mindfulness, alertness. That’s what the right mindfulness is about. Finding a frame of reference right here in the present moment where you can watch what’s actually happening right here, right now, because the cause of suffering doesn’t lie far away at all. It’s something you can observe happening right here, right now. Our problem is that we’re looking in other places, so we don’t see what’s happening right here, right now. So the Buddha has you focus on the body in and of itself. In other words, not in reference to what you would like it to be or how you think it looks to other people, or whether it’s strong enough to do the work you want it to do. It’s simply your experience of the body right here, or your experience of feeling. Feelings, mind states, mental qualities, in and of themselves, right here. You do that so the mind can settle down in a state of good, solid concentration. For example, you can take the breath as an object. Focus on how you actually feel the breathing process right now. It’s not just air coming in and out of the nose. It’s a movement of energy through the different parts of the body. You may feel it most in the head or in the chest or in the shoulders and the abdomen, in front or in back. But just take some time to notice where you actually feel it. Try to put aside your preconceived notions of where you should be feeling it. Where does it actually get felt? And then notice what kind of breathing feels good, those different sensations you feel in the body. Can you notice when they tell you that you’ve been breathing in long enough and it’s time to turn around and breathe out? What are the signs? The same with the out-breath. At what point when you breathe out are you beginning to squeeze the energy out of the body? That’s not necessary. You can turn around and breathe in again. You’d like to breathe with a sense of fullness, both with the in-breath and with the out-breath. So the basic energy level in the body feels good all the way through. And the breathing process doesn’t harm it, doesn’t put undue pressure on it. As you’re doing this, mindfulness means keeping the breath in mind, and alertness means actually watching, one, how the breath is going, and then two, noticing whether your mind is actually staying with the breath or it’s wandering off someplace else. If you catch it wandering off, come right back. This is one of the functions of ardency, which is a quality we need to bring to the meditation. The other function is, while you’re with the breath, try to be as sensitive as you can be to how the breathing feels. The more sensitive you are, the easier it is to settle down to find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels really good. And the more you’ll see, the more you’ll know of what’s going on. Ardency is what takes these very simple processes of breathing, mindfulness, alertness, and heightens them so that they become the basis for true knowledge. One of the images of the path is of a raft that you take across a river. If you’ve heard of the image before, you know how it ends. When you get to the other side of the river, you don’t need a raft. You need to carry it with you. But while you’re crossing the river, you have to be very careful to hold on to the raft. You don’t want to let go. And as you’re meditating, you might think of yourself as building the raft. So you want to do a good job. You don’t want your raft to suddenly start falling apart halfway across the river. That means you want to be alert to what you’re doing, mindful, ardent in doing it well. Have a sense of pride in your craftsmanship. When you breathe in and breathe out, don’t throw the breath away. Think of each breath as an opportunity to notice how the mind is staying in the present and how the breathing feels in the body. Sometimes a rhythm of breathing that feels good for a while may suddenly start not feeling so good, and you want to catch that in time. If you don’t, the mind will start getting irritable and will start looking for other places to go. So give it your full attention, your whole awareness, your whole heart as well, because we are in this for happiness. It’s not just an intellectual exercise. We’re in it for the happiness, the sense of well-being that can come both on the path and as the path matures and starts yielding its fruit. This is what ardency means—giving it your whole attention and giving it your whole heart. One of the problems in our society is that people tend to be sloppy in how they do things. There are very few people who develop crafts anymore. In the old days, the Buddha could talk about comparisons with being a good cook, being a good musician, being a good athlete, soldier—all of which involved skills. So as you meditate, you might want to think about skills you’ve developed in the past, what kind of qualities of mind you had to bring to them. There had to be desire, the desire to do it, and also the desire to do it well. If you focus too much simply on what you wanted at the end of the process, you’d often miss the steps of the process that were supposed to get you there. So you want to fine-tune your desire here. You want to stick with it, be intent in what you’re doing, and use your ingenuity. If you find that something’s not working out, try some changes. All of this comes under the quality of ardency, the desire to do it well, because knowledge does come from skill. The knowledge comes from listening or reading, which is one level of knowledge. There’s the knowledge of thinking about what you’ve heard or read. But the real knowledge, the real understanding, comes from trying to develop these qualities in the mind. That’s the aspect when skill comes in, or the stage when skill comes in. In your effort to do it well, you learn a lot about the mind, you learn a lot about your self, you learn a lot about the breath, because you’re trying to bring these qualities—heightened mindfulness, heightened alertness, and heightened ardency. So even though the task may seem simple, simply being with the breath really strengthens the mind and gives you something that you can do in full sincerity. It reminds you that you really do want true happiness. And here’s a path that’s totally harmless. So for the next hour, try to give it your full heart, your full mind, your full attention. The more you pay attention, the more you’ll see. The more carefully you do this, the better. The more you do it, the better your raft. That’s why the Buddha said his duty was simply to point out the way, because we learn about the way through doing it, through developing these qualities as we try to get more and more skillful. The Buddha could have taken us to the end of suffering. He would have done it. But our problem is that we approach life with ignorance, which is a lack of skill. And no one person can make another person skillful. You have to do it for yourself by being observant, by being careful, noticing what the results are as you do something. And then, if you don’t like what you’ve got, using your ingenuity and trying to change. So give it your full attention, because this is a path that more than repays the effort you put into it.

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