NR Truths of the Will

October 17, 2008

We recite those chants before the evening meditation to get into the right frame of mind to meditate, to remind ourselves of why we’re here, what we’re trying to do. We’re here looking for true happiness. The true happiness is that it can’t depend on the suffering of others. That’s why we repeat that wish, “May all living beings be happy.” Because if our happiness depends on their suffering, it’s not going to last. So we want to find a base for happiness that lies inside, that doesn’t weigh on anybody at all. That’s why we’re here focusing on the breath, as a means of bringing the mind to concentration. You work with the breath to make it comfortable. In other words, you test, experiment, to see what rhythm of breathing feels best, feels most gratifying to the body. You try deep or shallow breathing, heavy or light, fast or slow, long or short. Then you find a rhythm of breathing, a texture of breathing that feels deep down good, and allows the mind to settle down. That’s an important quality of a happy mind, is that it can feel settled, feel secure inside, can focus on one thing for long periods of time, isn’t forced to move, to jump around, to worry about this, that, or the other thing. There’s a sense of good, solid foundation right here. This is a quality of mind that we work at developing. It takes practice, it is a skill. In some cases it takes time, it requires energy, and it can be frustrating, as with any skill. Progress is not guaranteed. But you stick with it. It starts out with a sense of conviction that this is possible, and a desire to see the results. Desire isn’t all bad. There’s the craving that leads to suffering, but there’s also the desire that leads to the cessation of suffering. And as you work with it, and you work with it intelligently, work with it skillfully, the desire does give results. If you’re not careful, you get too focused on what you want out of the meditation, and it doesn’t appear as quickly as you’d like, in that case the desire becomes part of the obstacle, or one of the obstacles that stands in the way. But if there’s no desire, there’s no reason for you to be here. There’s got to be some desire. So you focus in on the causes. In other words, be with this breath, right here, right now. And see what rhythm of breathing feels best for the body. Learn to breathe in a way that feels refreshing, satisfying. When you breathe out, try not to squeeze. Don’t squeeze the breath energy too hard, because that weakens you. If the breath is going to go out, it can go out on its own, you don’t have to help it. Then you breathe in again. See which part of the body would like to have a little more breath energy. Okay, breathe with that part of the body. Show some imagination in how you understand the breathing process. Experiment and see what works. You’re developing a state of mind here. This is the task with regard to the path. Each of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths entails a task which is appropriate to the truth. In the case of stress and suffering, it’s something you want to comprehend. To comprehend means you know it so thoroughly that you develop this passion for it. You see it so clearly that you don’t want to keep on creating stress and suffering. Then you look for the cause. When you see the cause and craving and ignorance, then you try to abandon it. But to see both the cause and the actual suffering, you have to develop the path, the qualities of mind that allow you to stay here in the present moment, continually. So you can watch cause and effect over time. You see things clearly for what they are. The more the mind settles down and is still, the more subtle things it can see. So this is something you have to develop, you have to work at it. And then you realize the cessation of suffering. You see that it’s actually right there. These Four Truths, the Four Noble Truths, fall into two sets, the first and the second truth, the truth of stress and suffering and the truth of its cause. These are things that are happening all the time. This is the way stress and suffering happens. As for the path, it’s something you have to want to follow. You have to want to develop it for it to develop. Otherwise, it just stays, there’s a little bit of mindfulness, and goes away. A little bit of concentration goes away, comes and goes. But for it to amount to something, you have to want to work at it. Years ago, William James made the distinction between two kinds of truths. There are truths of the observer, things that are true whether you want them to be or not, it’s just the way they are. And then there are truths of the will, things that will become true only if you want them to be true. For instance, the behavior of the stars, the behavior of atoms, it really doesn’t depend on you. It’s just the way things are. If you want to know them, you have to be very careful about how you observe them. You don’t want your desire for things to be a certain way to get in the way of what you’re trying to see. But with the path, you have to want it. It’s like the question if you’re going to be a good pianist or a good carpenter. If you don’t want to be a good pianist, it will never happen. If you don’t want to be a good carpenter, you’ll never learn the skills. You have to want these things for them to be true. And the truth of the path is that kind of truth. You have to want it strongly enough to work at it. You have to keep at it continually. It requires conviction in the beginning that this is a good path to follow, and it’s possible to follow. It’s possible to put an end to suffering and stress, and it’s worth all the work that goes into it. Fortunately, it’s not all work all the time, and it doesn’t save its rewards for the end. As the mind begins to settle down, there is a greater sense of ease and well-being. What often happens then is we get complacent, saying, “Here we are. It’s not that hard. You can do it.” And then you find that you lose it, and you can’t get back to it again. Then you begin to wonder, “Maybe the Buddha wasn’t really telling the truth.” But you should look at yourself. Where did you lose it? Complacency is not part of the path. It’s actually the opposite of the path. As the Buddha said, “All skillful qualities depend on heedfulness.” Heedfulness is that conviction that your actions matter. If you’re careful, you can prevent danger, you can prevent unfortunate consequences in your life. Your actions really do make a difference. Once you’re convinced of that, then you have to look at the way you practice. Meditation isn’t something you just squeeze into any old life or any old way of behaving. You have to look at your life as a whole. Is it a life conducive to getting the mind to settle down? Is it a life conducive to developing wisdom and insight and discernment? Some of the disturbances and distractions in our lives are things we don’t have any control over, but there are a lot of things that we do. As John Lee once said, “There are things that sometimes we open the doors and invite thieves into our house.” That’s enough. We open the windows and invite the birds and the bats to come flying in and take up residence. And then, when the house becomes unlivable, who are you going to blame? So this is one of those truths that if you believe it’s possible, and you want it to be possible, you want it to be an actuality. That’s the beginning of it actually becoming true. It’s a truth of the will. So even though someone looking at your life from the outside may say, “This probably is not going to work,” nobody with your background has ever become a good carpenter. Nobody from your background has made it onto the concert stage. Well, you can prove them if they’re wrong. Because again, it doesn’t depend so much on your background, it depends on your desire and learning how to deal with that desire in a mature way, focusing on the skills you need. Not just the mechanics of working with the breath, but also the mental skills of learning how to give yourself pep talks, encourage yourself on the path. This is possible. The Buddha didn’t lie, he didn’t make these things up just to please people, or to serve a social service. He put his life on the line, Kama. He found it is true, you can, through human effort, put an end to suffering and stress. You can free the mind from all its limitations. He spent forty-five years teaching this to people. You may not see right off the hand that what he had to say is true, but the possibility of it being true is something really worth exploring. Because if you don’t, what kind of life is there? So as you work on this path, remind yourself that it is work. There’s a lot that’s got to be done. But it’s good work. The Buddha never asked you to do anything. Anything that’s mean or despicable, anything you’d be ashamed to do, it’s all honorable qualities of mind that you’re developing. So that right there is one of the really good features of the path. And as you stick with it, you find that the glimpses you have of peace, respite, a sense of calm and well-being inside, they can grow. But you have to tend to them. Keep at it. They don’t do all the work for you. You have to help them. Until the point where you really do run into something that’s unconditioned, that doesn’t change. Then you’re secure. Then you know for sure that what the Buddha had to say is true. So give it your all. And you find that it repays you with more than all. And as for whether that’s true or not, that’s something you have to find out for yourself.

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