Taking Refuge

October 23, 2008

Focus your attention on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process. The breath here isn’t just the air coming in and out through the nose, but it’s any sense of energy, movement in the body. Notice where you feel that movement as you breathe in, and where you feel it as you breathe out. Where does it seem easiest to focus on the sensation of breathing? Allow your attention to settle right there, and allow the breathing to feel comfortable. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Make it more shallow or deeper, longer or shorter, heavier or lighter. Experiment for a while to see how the breathing process feels, and which kind of breathing feels best. When you get a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels good, stick with it. If after a while it feels tiresome, if it’s too gentle or too heavy, you can change. You’re trying to develop a quality called alertness, noticing what’s actually going on in the present moment. But to develop that quality, you have to develop other qualities as well. One of them is mindfulness. The ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you’re trying to keep the breath in mind. You want to remember each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that this is where you want to be with this sensation of breathing. As for other thoughts and other concerns, you don’t need them right now. Give the mind a chance to be on its own for a while without taking on responsibilities about tomorrow or the next day. You know what you’re going to do after the end of the meditation. Let those thoughts just subside. But you have to be heedful as well. In other words, realize that the mind is going to slip off very easily, so you have to watch over it carefully. Try to develop a strong sense that this is where you want to be, that this is good for you, to train the mind in this way. We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. What that means is that you’re trying to develop their qualities in your mind so you can become your own refuge. That’s another one of the Buddha’s statements. You are your own mainstay. You are your own refuge. Or you can be your mainstay. You can be your refuge only when you train the mind. Because otherwise, and this is one of the first things you notice as you meditate, the mind wanders all over the place. It’s not all that dependable. But the important thing is that it can be trained, and you can train it yourself. There’s nobody else who can come in and crack the whip over you and force you to stay with the breath. You’ve got to find the motivation yourself for realizing this is what you need to do, is get the mind in good, solid shape so you can depend on it. It’s probably one of the scariest things in the world when you realize that there are areas in which you cannot depend on yourself. You want to be a good person, responsible, moral. You want to be principled. But it’s very possible there are situations in which you would let your principles go, when you get pushed to the edge. Some people’s edge has a lot lower threshold than others. But ideally, you want to be able to train the mind so that no matter where you are, no matter what the situation, you would stick with your principles. And that requires a lot of training. And the training is motivated by this quality of heedfulness, realizing that your actions really do make a difference in your life. You’re the one who makes the choices as to what to do in certain situations. You’re the one who makes the choices as to what to say and think. And if you’re careless, you can end up causing a lot of trouble, both for yourself and for the people around you. Just before the Buddha passed away, this was his last instruction, which was to be heedful. Because, as he said, all skillful qualities come from heedfulness. The realization that there are lots of dangers in life, and not all the dangers are outside. In fact, the main dangers are inside. Greed, anger, and delusion can cause you to do all sorts of stupid things. But the mind can be trained. If the mind couldn’t be trained, or if your actions did make a difference, then heedfulness would not be an issue at all. So heedfulness, even though it means a certain sort of wariness, it also means trust and confidence in the fact that your actions do make a difference and that they can be trained. When I first went to stay with Ajahn Phu, my teacher in Thailand, I asked him about the issue of belief, of faith in Buddhism. He said, “The only thing you’re asked to believe in is in the principle of your actions, that they do make a difference and you’re the one making the choices.” But that belief carries a lot with it. It means you have to be very careful. I guess it’s so easy for delusion to get into the mind. Then you’d misunderstand things. There are five qualities that get in the way of concentration, and they’re all based on this problem of delusion. One of the qualities is sensual desire. You sit here and instead of thinking about your breath, you think about what you’d like to eat. At the end of the meditation or when you go home, you think about anything else that really attracts you. And while you’re thinking about it, there’s a part of the mind that says, “Well, this really is attractive. This really is nice to think about.” In other words, you fall for the hindrance. So you have to be heedful and realize that sensual desire is not the path. You’re not developing mindfulness, alertness, and all these other good qualities while you’re sitting there thinking about sensual pleasures. So you have to learn how to question the thought that says, “This is really attractive. This is really worth thinking about.” It’s that willingness to question your thoughts that’s where heedfulness comes in and protects you from a lot of misunderstandings. The second quality is ill will. You start thinking about someone who’s wronged you, and you think about how much you’d like to see that person suffer. The mind can give all sorts of reasons why that person really does deserve to suffer, but you’ve got to stop and ask yourself, “What would you gain from that other person suffering?” Often, when people suffer, they end up creating more havoc than before, as they thrash around. It’s a much better place if everybody could find happiness within. So heedfulness reminds you to question the thought of ill will. The third obstacle you’re going to run into is drowsiness, sleepiness. You sit here and the mind begins to drift off, and you start feeling drowsy and thinking, “I really should rest.” You’ve fallen for the hindrance. You’ve got to remind yourself that not every feeling of sleepiness really does come from the body’s need to sleep. Sometimes you get bored. So you’ve got to test your sleepiness first. One way is to change the way you breathe. If your breathing is really subtle and light, that may be putting you to sleep, so breathe more heavily. You can go out and walk, do some walking meditation. One of the Forest of Gems recommends walking backwards. Your fear of running into something will keep you awake. If you find that you’re walking and you’re still sleeping, then maybe you really do need some rest. But the important thing is that you do not give in to the sleepiness the first time it comes. You don’t believe the sleepiness the first time it comes. You’ve got to question it. The fourth hindrance is restlessness and anxiety. You start worrying about things. A part of you says, “I’ve really got to worry about this. I really have to think about this and prepare for that danger, that possibility, whatever it is.” But you’ve got to look at your thinking. Are you actually accomplishing anything by your thinking, or is it just the mind spinning its wheels and going nowhere? If that’s the case, you’re actually wearing down your mind. Instead of putting yourself in a better position to deal with whatever future dangers there may be, you’re making the situation worse. Question your worrying. Don’t believe the mind every time it says you’ve got to be anxious about something. Then there’s uncertainty. Uncertainty about your own ability to do the practice. Uncertainty about whether the practice is a good thing. Uncertainty about what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. Uncertainty about the way you conduct your life. Again, you can give yourself all sorts of reasons as to why you’ve got to be doubtful. You can’t believe everything you hear. But how are you going to overcome your doubts? You’ve got to experiment. Give things a try. Experimenting is not going to solve the issue. What happens, say, if you stay with a breath for an hour and really stick with it? Give it a try. As the Buddha taught his son, you look at your actions, you look at your intentions, and if you expect they’re going to be harmful, then you don’t do them. But if you’re not sure, it might be okay. Well, go ahead and try. Follow up with that intention. And while you’re following it, look at what’s actually happening as a result of your actions. If it seems okay, well, keep with it. If you begin to see clearly that there are going to be some problems, you’re creating some harm, then stop. Then, after the action is over, reflect on it. What were the actual results of the action? And if you see that you actually harmed somebody, remind yourself not to repeat that mistake. This is how you overcome doubt. It’s through experimenting. Many of us would like to have everything all laid out and explained beforehand. And in some cases, there are certain principles at hold across the board. You don’t want to kill. You don’t want to steal. You don’t want to have illicit sex. These things are harmful. You don’t want to lie. You don’t want to take intoxicants. You can hold to these as principles across the board. But there are a lot of other areas in life where the basic precepts don’t touch. That’s where you have to learn to use your own powers of observation. That’s how you overcome doubt. Not by just sitting there doubting, but actually being willing to make decisions. Make an experiment. Test your ideas. See what works and what doesn’t work. So in each of these cases, heedfulness means questioning your line of thinking, putting it to the test, not believing everything that comes into your head. But in order to put these things to the test and really get good answers, you’ve got to develop your powers of observation. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, because the mind, when it’s still and steady, can see things a lot more clearly than when it’s just running around. So this is the Buddhist strategy. You have to learn how to build and observe things for yourself. Then he gives you advice on how to become a reliable observer. The steadier your mind can get, the more consistently it can stay steady, the more clearly you’ll be able to see things and understand what actions are skillful and what ones are not, which ones you can rely on and which ones you can’t, which thoughts you can rely on and which ones you can’t. This is how you gradually become more and more a reliable observer, more and more able to depend on yourself, more and more able to take yourself as your mainstay. But the underlying principle is this principle of heedfulness, realizing that your actions really do make a difference and you’ve got to be careful. You can’t believe everything that comes into your head, because the mind does have this problem of delusion, ideas that we’ve picked up from who knows where that we’ve never really tested, and yet we hold on to them and we make decisions based on them. We can often be very blind to what the actual results of our actions are. On top of that, we’ve got this problem of aging, illness, and death. That channel we had just now says we’re subject to these things. An alternative translation is that these things are ordinary. This is a normal course of life. We’re all going to die at some time. It’s one of those facts that we all know, but we act as if we don’t. The problem is we don’t know when we’re going to die or when we’re going to get sick, how quickly aging is going to sneak up on us, which should give a sense of urgency to this need to develop good, reliable qualities in the mind. The only thing you’ll be able to really rely on is when aging, illness, and death hit you. The only things you’re going to be able to rely on are the good qualities you’ve built into your mind. You can’t sit around and think, “Well, maybe some place, maybe a year from now or ten years from now, I’ll work at this.” It might be too late. You’ve got to work now. The strengthening of the mind, the ability to make the mind more solid and reliable, this should be your top priority. So when you find the mind wandering off, of course, the meditation reminds you that you don’t have time to wander around and sniff at the flowers and look at the sky. You’ve got this opportunity to train the mind, so try to make the most of it. The more you can bring this quality of heedfulness to bear, the more skillful your meditation will become, for you to realize that it’s a life-and-death matter. And your actions, as I say, make all the difference. The actions come from your mind, the intentions that cause you to act and speak and think. So you want to make sure those intentions are coming from a good, solid place, a place of mindfulness, alertness, heedfulness, compassion, the desire to create no harm. The desire to find something solid and reliable inside. Those qualities are going to keep you on course.

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