Basic Steps

December 30, 2008

Each time you begin to meditate, start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness—your happiness, the happiness of other beings. Tell yourself, “May I find true happiness. May all beings find true happiness.” That’s why we’re here. We’re looking for a happiness that’s true. A happiness that lasts, which is going to require some work. True happiness is different from the normal pleasures of the world. Some pleasures you can buy. Some pleasures come simply from relaxing. But they come and go. If you want happiness that’s true, it has to come from within the mind, and the mind needs to be trained. Otherwise, it can create all kinds of trouble instead of the happiness you want. At the same time, the happiness that comes from meditation, the happiness that comes from within, doesn’t create any burdens for anyone else. Again, this is very different from normal happiness. Normal happiness is like eating. When you eat, somebody else has to suffer someplace down the line. So we want to look inside. And, of course, when you look inside, you see there are all kinds of things going on in the mind. So the first step in training it is to make up your mind that you’re going to stay with one intention. The intention here is to stay with the breath. To get prepared for that, you put the body into position and the mind into position. The body in position means you sit with your right leg on top of your left, your hands in your left, your right hand on top of your left hand. Think of a string extending from the top of your head up to one of the rafters here on the roof of the hall. Your body is hanging from that string. In other words, allow your back to align itself in a way that feels straight, not too straight, but straight enough to be comfortable, so the body doesn’t slump down. That’s the body in position. The mind in position is focused on the sensation of the breathing, wherever you feel it. It could be a breath in at the nose. You may notice the rise and fall of the chest as you breathe in, or the rise and fall of your shoulders, the expansion and contraction of your abdomen, or just the general flow of energy throughout the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Focus on whatever sensation seems most prominent, and allow it to be comfortable. Notice what kind of breathing feels just right, not too long, not too short, not too shallow, not too deep, not too heavy or light, not too fast, not too slow. You might want to experiment a bit. Ajaan Lee recommends starting out with a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, then allowing the breath to find a rhythm that feels good. Feel satisfying. Then notice how the needs of the body may change. Sometimes a certain rhythm feels good for a while, and then it doesn’t feel so good anymore. Then you’ve got to experiment some more. In other words, you’ve got to be watchful. Don’t let the breath get mechanical. Otherwise, you’ll get bored. Realize that as you breathe in for a while, you’re going to be changing the energy needs of the body. So you have to adjust the breath so it feels just right coming in, just right going out. If the mind wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged. Don’t give up. Each time you come back, ask yourself, “Could the breath be more comfortable? Could it be more gratifying?” What kind of breathing allows the body to feel full all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out-breath? In other words, you’re not trying to squeeze the breath energy out of the body as you breathe out. The breath will go out on its own. At the same time, when you’re breathing in, you don’t want to force it in to be too long. If the mind wanders off again, ask it, “Where are you going? You’re looking for trouble. You’re looking for your same old pleasures as before. We’re here working on something new, something you haven’t experienced before, a pleasure, a happiness, a sense of well-being that comes from deep down inside.” That can come only when the mind has spent some time with one object, focused on one thing. As the Buddha once said, “There is no happiness without joy.” Here he’s talking about true happiness. It comes from the mind, feels peaceful, feels at ease when it can settle down and feel at home here in the present moment. So as you get the breath comfortable, that’s the home for the mind. And as soon as the breath starts feeling comfortable, think of allowing that sense of comfort to spread through different parts of the body. Go down the back, out the legs, to the tips of the toes. See how that part of the body feels comfortable, again, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then you go down the shoulders and the arms. Think of that part of the body feeling comfortable all the way with the in-breath, all the way with the out-breath. If you don’t feel any breath energy, you might think simply, “Well, just allow those parts of the body to relax while you maintain your posture.” But relax into the posture. If you find any joints where you feel any tension, say in your wrists, in your fingers, in your elbows, again, allow them to relax all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Think of that sense of comfort spreading down the front of the torso, all the way down through your intestines. Think of the whole body feeling at ease, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. What you’re doing is you’re giving yourself work to do with the pleasure. If you simply allow the breath to be pleasant, after a while you find yourself drifting off. You lose your focus. You may even hit a little air pocket where you drop out of consciousness for a second and come back. You have to avoid that. That’s why you work with the sensation of the comfort, the ease, the breath energy flowing through the different parts of the body so that the whole body feels unified, at ease, nourished by the breath. Now, if pains happen to come up while you’re sitting here, the first step is not to pay any attention to them. If the pain comes up in your leg, say, “Well, that’s just in the leg. It’s not me. There’s just a pain there, but it’s not aimed at me. I don’t have to suffer from it. I don’t have to identify with the leg. I can be more interested in the sensation of the comfortable breathing.” So maintain your foundation there with the breath. Don’t get distracted by the pain. When there’s a sense of well-being that goes deep down inside, right down into the heart, then you can think of it spreading down through the area where the pain is, down through the hips, down through the legs, the knees, the ankles, wherever the pain may be, and then out through to the foot. You loosen up any sense of tension or tightness that may be connected to the pain. But you maintain your center at the spot where you began, the center where the sense of the ease and well-being of the breath is most prominent. You’ve got to learn how to protect that focal point, that sense of ease, at that point. Learn to cherish it, because it’s going to be your foundation. When you learn how to keep that sense of ease going as you’re sitting here, then when you get up, try to keep it going as well. Get up, walk back to the house, walk back to your tent, have that sense of well-being. In your heart, in your chest, in the middle of the head, wherever your focal point is. When the mind has a sense of ease, a sense of being at home here, that’s the foundation for training it even further. For the time being, don’t worry about where the training is going to go. Focus on what you’re doing right now. Get the foundation strong. It’s like putting up a tall building. If the foundation is weak, then no matter how strong the rest of the structure is, it’s going to fall down. You’ve got to get the foundation strong, solid, secure. So pay a lot of attention to this step in the practice. Because everything else grows from here.

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