Mindful, Alert & Ardent

April 11, 2009

We’re going to start meditating now. The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means “to develop.” We’re trying to develop good qualities of the mind. We start out with a few simple ones—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. For example, think of the breath and try to keep the breath in mind. That’s mindfulness, the keeping in mind part. So you have to start out with an intent. You’re going to stay with the breath all the way in, with the in-breath, all the way out with the out-breath, and then with the next breath, and then with the next. Although, take it one at a time. If you start thinking about how many breaths you’re going to be with in the course of the hour, you lose it. You’ve got just this one breath right now. Then watch it, what’s going on. That’s alertness, to see how it feels. Also, be alert to notice when the mind is beginning to wander off. If it wanders off, bring it right back. That’s the beginning of the quality called ardency. In other words, you really do want to work at doing this skillfully. That’s when the mind wanders off. You don’t just let it take a little long time to wander around. As soon as you catch it wandering off, you don’t even have to let the thought be completed. Just bring it right back to the breath. And while you’re with the breath, the quality of ardency means trying to be really sensitive to how it feels, because you want a way of breathing that feels good. If it doesn’t feel good, you’re not going to stay. Notice what kind of breathing would feel best for the body right now. Just one good breath. How would that feel? Would you like a breath that goes all the way down to the abdomen? Would you like long breathing, deep breathing, shallow breathing? Slow or fast? Heavy or light? Short or long? Whatever. Just pose that question to the mind. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? And see how the body responds. Or you can experiment with different kinds of breathing to see how they feel. When you get a rhythm that feels good, stick with it. And if after a while it doesn’t feel good anymore, then you can change. So the quality of ardency doesn’t mean that you put a lot of effort into it, just on the one hand that you’re continuous in your effort and you try to be very, very sensitive to what’s working. Because an important part of right effort in the meditation is that you give rise to a desire in the mind to do it, and then you maintain that desire. Learn how to apply the effort in such a way that you enjoy it, that you keep on wanting to do it. It also means that there are different kinds of effort you can exert right now, if the mind is with the breath. If it’s not with the breath, you want to maintain it. If it’s not with the breath, you want to drop whatever it’s going with and come back to the breath. In other words, you don’t simply note what’s happening, good or bad. If you notice that something happening is skillful, you try to keep it going, get it stronger. If it’s not skillful, try to let it go. And the other aspect to right effort is figuring out how much effort you want to put into it. How much effort is needed right now? A lot of energy or just enough to keep things going? Because sometimes, if something unskillful comes up in the mind, all you have to do is look at it and it goes away. You recognize, “Oh, this is someplace where I don’t want to go,” and it drops out of sight. Other times, simply noticing is not enough. You’ve got to exert some effort again to get rid of that unskillful. The effort here can be what the Buddha calls “physical,” i.e., using the breath, making the breath as really comfortable as you can, so that you’re not interested in anything else. It feels good coming in, it feels good going out. That sense of goodness just saturates every little cell of your body. When there’s a feeling of ease with the breath, allow it to spread around. If that’s not enough to get rid of the unskillful distraction, then it’s not enough. Look at it. See what kind of distraction this is. Is this someplace you really want to go? Many of the thoughts that distract us are things that have been churning around in the mind all day long. There’s nothing new. You don’t learn anything new. You don’t gain anything new by following them. Why would you want to? Learn to question them. See them as a process of cause and effect. Where does this thought go? Most of your thoughts don’t go anywhere. Or they may go to something that’s really unskillful. That helps you let go of them. And then there’s what’s called a mental effort, which means learning how to hold certain perceptions in mind. How do you perceive the breath in a way that makes it interesting? Because the breathing is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole energy process by which the air comes in and out. And that energy process affects the entire nervous system. Think about that. When you breathe in, think of every nerve in the body being nourished by energy. What does that do to the way you breathe? Try to think of all the different parts of the body working together rather than working at cross-purposes. What does that do to the way you breathe? What does that do to the mind? Try to find the way of perceiving the breath that makes it more interesting and makes your distractions less interesting. And you should get involved in exploring the breath in this way. You find that you really are developing these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, ardency. The mind feels energized. It feels more awake, more alive. It’s more interested in doing skillful things. Because as the mind gets stronger, you find that not only as you’re sitting here meditating, but also as you go through daily life, you have more energy for choosing the skillful alternative. A lot of times in day-to-day life, we know what would be skillful or unskillful, but we just don’t have the energy to put forth the effort. It seems too much, too hard. So we keep on making unskillful choices day after day after day. But as the mind gets more energy, you find that you get tired of the unskillful choice. You’d rather have put in the effort to get the good results that you really want. So these qualities of mind, as you develop them, don’t stay developed only while you’re meditating. It’s like going down to the gym. As the body gets stronger, you’re stronger not only in the gym, but as you go through your activities throughout the day. So you’ve got a whole hour here, and your only responsibility is to work directly on the mind. The events of the day, the events of tomorrow, just put those aside. Give the mind a chance to develop, to grow, to gain some strength. And as for your responsibilities outside of the meditation, don’t be afraid. They’ll be there when you come out of the meditation. But if you’d give the whole hour to the breath, give the whole hour to developing mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, you’ll be in a much better position to take on whatever other responsibilities you have.

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