Why We Train the Mind

May 9, 2009

Two of the chants we chanted just now, we take them together to explain why we practice. One talking about how the world is swept away, how things don’t endure, offers no shelter. And then, “May I be happy in the midst of all that.” All of that uncertainty, all of that danger, the danger of our own craving, the danger of looking for happiness in things that slip away. This is why we turn around and look in the mind. This is where there’s hope for something solid and sure. Of course, when you first look at your mind, there’s nothing much solid or sure about it. You make up your mind to do one thing, and five seconds later, you’ve changed your mind. As the Buddha once said, there’s no easy simile to compare with how fast the mind can change. And the Buddha was a master of similes. Even the twinkling of an eye is slower than the way the mind can change. But it can be trained. That’s the important point. When you’ve reached the point where you see how doomed a failure any quest for happiness outside is going to be, that’s when you can put energy into the practice. Happiness as a conviction in the practice is conditioned by suffering. You see that things are really bad. He doesn’t say that all life is suffering. That’s a misrepresentation of what he had to say. But there is suffering in life. And most of the things that we really pin our hopes on tend to fall apart very easily. When you’ve had enough of that, then you say, “Well, maybe there’s another way out, another way to happiness.” And you start looking inside, looking into this practice of training the mind through generosity, through virtue, through meditation. And you see that you really can change the direction of the mind, to look for happiness in new places, to look for happiness in new ways. Like we’re doing right now, focusing on the breath. Getting the mind to stay in the present moment. It’s going to have a good, solid place to look at its thoughts, a good, solid place to look at whatever arises, the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. So you cultivate this sense of being very steadily aware. Mindful, alert, ardent. Those are the three qualities. Work in training the mind. Mindful in the sense of you keep something in mind. In other words, you keep the breath in mind. Alert means you watch what’s happening with the breath. When it comes in, where do you feel it? When it goes out, where do you feel it? In what ways is it comfortable? In what ways is it not? What can you do to change it? That’s a quality called evaluation. Taking stock of the breath and exploring what are the potentials that the breath energy has. This flow of energy in the body. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole flow of energy as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where does it feel good? Focus on that and see if you can stay there. The quality of ardency is what helps keep you there. Ardency is another term for right effort. Right effort has many aspects. As the Buddha said, it starts by generating desire to do away with unselfishness. Developing skillful mental qualities and generating desire to develop skillful ones. The quality of desire there is important. There are lots of different ways you can fire that desire. One is looking at the drawbacks of not having a concentrated mind, of not being mindful, of not being alert. The Buddha says we’re a slave to craving. Craving is like this huge blind monster that goes thrashing around. We’re a slave to craving. We get pulled along wherever the craving goes. It fastens on this object as being desirable, that object as being disagreeable. There’s usually very little rhyme or reason in his choices. It’s just likes and dislikes. It doesn’t want to be questioned about why. So it’s sometimes focusing on the drawbacks of an unfocused mind or an uncentered mind. That can give rise to the desire to put more energy into the practice. Sometimes it’s a more positive motivation. When you see the good that can come from a centered mind, the good that can come from a mind that develops discernment. But this is an important part of developing right effort. It’s this ability to generate the desire. There are two emotions that are central to the practice. Sanghvega is the feeling of urgency, realizing that there are dangers in the mind that you’ve got to learn how to overcome. If you don’t, you’re putting yourself into all sorts of trouble. It’s not just you. You look all around you. This is the way everybody is who hasn’t trained the mind. And it’s scary. The word sanghvega is related to the word for terror, a strong sense of how dangerous things really are. But then it’s coupled with passada, a sense of confidence that there is a way out and you can manage it. Sanghvega, on its own, turns into depression very easily, a very negative mind state. Passada, on its own, tends to be complacent. You put the two of them together, and they can keep you on the path. That’s one element of right effort, generating desire. And then it’s figuring out exactly what effort is required right now. Because it’s not just letting go, or it’s not just any one thing. There are lots of different kinds of right effort. There’s the effort to develop. As you develop more mindfulness and develop more concentration, there’s the effort to let go. There’s the effort to prevent things from happening. In other words, you know that you’re going to be entering a situation where you tend to be angry or you tend to lose it, and you prepare yourself, learn how to think in advance. Thinking is an essential part of the practice. We don’t just sit here and note, note, note, or accept, accept, accept, or just be in the present moment. Sometimes you actually have to plan ahead. But it’s learning how to figure out what is the appropriate kind of effort right now. This is where discernment forms an essential part of right effort. Something should simply be watched. As the Buddha noted, there are some problems in the mind that go away simply when you watch them with equanimity. Other times you have to fabricate, as he says, an effort, fabricate an intention to do away with them. Or to develop whatever is needed. That’s the second part of right effort. It’s figuring out exactly what kind of effort is needed right now. For example, the Four Noble Truths. You want to comprehend suffering. That means watching it until you develop a sense of dispassion for whatever’s causing it. When you see what’s causing it, then you let it go. You develop the factors of the path, and ultimately you want to realize the end of suffering. So there are different duties and different approaches that can be appropriate at any one time. It’s trying to figure out what’s the appropriate effort right now. That’s an important part of the practice. Then, of course, there’s the amount of effort you want to put in. Sometimes it’s very delicate and very precise. Other times it requires a lot of effort. You’re using a lot of strength. You’ve probably heard that story about a monk named Sona who was very delicately brought up. He was practicing very hard, doing walking meditations until the soles of his feet had split. He was bleeding all over the place. He got discouraged. He put all this effort in, and yet he still hadn’t received any results. The Buddha read his mind. He appeared right in front of him and asked him, “Are you planning to disrobe?” Sona said, “Well, yeah, I was thinking about it.” The Buddha asked him, “When you were back when you were a layman and you played the lute, what happened when the string was too loose?” He said, “Well, the sound wasn’t good.” “How about when it was too tight?” He said, “The sound wasn’t good. It had to be just right.” In the same way, the Buddha said that you take the five faculties, or the five qualities in the mind that he calls faculties, and you tune your level of energy first. It’s like tuning five strings on a guitar. First you tune one string, and then once that string is in tune, you tune the other ones to it. In this case, you tune the level of energy that you can put in, and then you tune the level of your conviction and your mindfulness and your concentration and discernment around that. That’s how you practice. In other words, you look at how much energy you can put in. Make sure that your conviction is proportionate to that. Some days you’d like to have awakening at the end of the meditation session, but your energy just isn’t up for it. So you’ve got to tune the level of your conviction. Tune the level of your mindfulness to what you can do. Then as time develops, you find that you can start putting more energy in. So you ramp up the conviction. You ramp up all the other factors. And there are times when there’s going to be setbacks, so you tune them back. So right effort doesn’t mean just a middling effort. It means an effort that’s appropriate to what you can handle, and also that’s appropriate to the task. As I said earlier, as the Buddha pointed out, there are some problems in the mind. All you have to do is just look at them and they go away. Others require a lot of effort. You have to work with what he calls the different kinds of fabrication. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is direct thought and evaluation, in other words, how you narrate and analyze the problem to yourself; and there’s mental fabrication, the feelings around it. The word “feelings” here doesn’t mean emotions, it just means simply the feeling tone around the issue, and your perceptions. For example, the way you perceive the breath, how it relates to a particular unskillful emotion. If anger comes up, ask yourself, “Well, how am I breathing in response to this anger?” You may weaken the anger by the way I breathe, at least not having such a strong hold over the body. Often the anger feels strong and it feels overwhelming because the way you breathe has set off different hormones in the body that make the anger seem stronger than it actually is. So you bring your perception of the breath into consideration. You can look at your perception of how you see the situation. If you see yourself as a judge sitting up on a bench, passing judgment on the people below you, it can actually increase the level of anger, your sense of righteous indignation. But the Buddha tells you that when you see someone that you’re angry about, you’ve done something that angers you. Think of yourself as a person walking across a desert. You’re not a judge sitting in the comfort of a bench. You’re someone walking across the desert. You’re tired. You’re hot, thirsty, trembling. You come across a little bit of water in the footprint of a cow. So you do what you can to get that water, even if it means squatting down and slurping it up. You don’t think of your pride. You don’t think of what other people are going to think. You realize that you need the water of other people’s goodness. If you’re going to be able to maintain your goodness, that’s an important perception to keep in mind. So these are the different kinds of what are called fabrications that you bring to a particular unskillful emotion. The way you breathe, the way you narrate and analyze the issue to yourself, and the perceptions you hold in mind. So these are the different facets of right effort. It’s generating the desire to want to do the skillful thing, and then figuring out what the skillful thing is and how much energy you have to apply to it, or how much energy is needed if you’re going to get results. Happiness has the chance to succeed. The mind can be trained this way. When the mind is trained, as the Buddha said, it brings happiness. One of the interesting things about the Buddhist teachings is that a lot of the central terms are not defined. He never defines “mind.” He never defines “happiness,” even with stress and suffering. He just gives examples, but he doesn’t define what it is, because he’s teaching us a skill. It’s not just a body of knowledge to be memorized, or a system of thought to be talked about. In the old days, they talked about two kinds of knowledge. There was scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribes liked to have things defined. They wanted the kind of knowledge that you could write down in words. Warriors needed skills. They had to master archery. They had to master horse riding. All kinds of different things. The mastery doesn’t depend so much on definition as getting a feel for things. Any skill, the more you master the skill, the more your sense of the different elements of the skill begins to grow. You don’t want to hem it in or confine it by a set definition. Your sense of your mind begins to change as you’re training. Your sense of happiness begins to change. As you get more and more adept at finding happiness, it’s more refined, more reliable. Your sense of stress and suffering gets more and more refined as well. In the first deep stages of concentration, you begin to realize there is stress there. As the Buddha said, when you get into the deep levels of jhana, and you’ve mastered them, you begin to look and see what here in this state of jhana, in terms of the five aggregates, is still stressful, inconstant, empty. That way you’ll be able to get rid of your attachment, see through your attachment to these things, and find a happiness that doesn’t have to latch on to anything at all. So your sense of your mind expands. Your sense of happiness expands. Your sense of stress gets more and more subtle, which is why the Buddha doesn’t define these terms. He wants you to find out about them on your own. So you train your mind for happiness. You know what it means to train the mind and what that happiness is going to be. You can find that out only by doing the training. But it’s the suffering you already know. That’s what gives a large part of the impetus to getting started on the training and sticking with it, seeing it through to the end. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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