Acceptance

June 1, 2009

Just focus on the breath. See what kind of breathing feels best. You can focus on any spot in the body where you’re sensitive to the sensation of breathing. It doesn’t have to be where the air is passing through the nose. It can be the rise and fall of the stomach, the rise and fall of the chest. Or any place in the body where you sense, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Then you can experiment with the breathing to see what feels good right now. It may take a while to decide what you like. Sometimes you may settle on a rhythm that feels good, and then after a while it doesn’t feel so good anymore. So you experiment some more. This way you’re developing a lot of good qualities in the mind all at once. Mindfulness, i.e., keeping the breath in mind, and alertness, watching what’s actually happening, what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. You’re also showing goodwill for yourself, because the way you breathe has an immediate impact on how you feel in your body and where the mind is going to stay in the present moment. If you learn how to tend to yourself in this way, you’re in a much better position to start feeling goodwill for other people. If you’re feeling strung out or irritable, it’s hard to have goodwill for anyone else, because you’re not showing goodwill to yourself. So give yourself a chance. Give yourself a good place to feed right here. And you find that the mind, as it’s feeding on this sense of well-being, and strengthened by mindfulness and alertness, has more energy to put into the practice. Both the practice you’re doing right now as you’re meditating and other aspects of the practice that have to do with other people, being generous, being virtuous, these things require energy. So as you develop this energy in the mind right here, you’re not the only one who’s going to benefit. The people around you benefit as well. So you take what you’ve got and you make the best use of it. That’s a basic principle in the practice. All the good qualities in the mind that the Buddha talks about developing—mindfulness, alertness, ardency, conviction, persistence, concentration, discernment—these are all things we have to some extent already. If we didn’t have them at all, we wouldn’t be human beings. It’s simply a matter of taking stock of what we’ve got and having the conviction that if you develop these qualities, they’re going to take you in the right direction. So as you’re developing a sense of acceptance of where you are—remember, accepting where you are doesn’t mean you’re going to stay where you are; it’s like going into a cave in the kitchen. You open the refrigerator and you see what you’ve got, and then you try to make a good meal of whatever’s there. But if it’s raw eggs in the refrigerator, you’re not going to eat raw eggs. You’ve got to cook them. So the acceptance means you accept the fact that that’s what you’ve got today. You’ve got eggs in the refrigerator. You may have originally wanted to have a meal that was based on something else, but this is what you’ve got. You’ve got eggs today. There’s no time to go down to the store and get something else. So you take what you’ve got and then you use your skill. You make scrambled eggs. You can make poached eggs, fried eggs, a soufflé. There are all kinds of things you can do with the eggs. So simply sitting there and eating the raw eggs is not what the Buddha meant by accepting things. It’s hard to find the word acceptance in the Pali Canon. He does use the word contentment. In other words, you’re content with what you’re starting out with. You’re content with the situation around you. If you had to wait until the situation around you was a perfect place to practice, you would never get to practice, because there are no perfect places. There’s always something wrong or something you can criticize. But if you realize that it’s good enough to practice, you’re content. Then you allow yourself to be content with that. And then you content yourself with where you’re starting out, but you don’t content yourself with staying there. The Buddha once said that the secret to his awakening was that he didn’t allow himself to stay content with whatever attainment he had. This didn’t mean that he rushed through everything really fast. After all, he was exploring, feeling his way. He had to explore and detect exactly what it was that was going to work in his practice. And then when he found something was going to work, he had to develop it, sit with it for a while to see what its potential was. So it’s the same with meditation. For us, we sit with the breath, and we’re thinking about how we want to get in this state of jhana or gain that state of insight. What’s not going to happen by sitting there thinking about it? It’s going to happen by staying with the breath. Realize that if you’re going to find it, you’re going to find it here in the breath, in this state of mind that stays with the breath, that’s mindful of the breath. To think of it another way, it’s like getting fruit on your tree. You want ripe fruit, but as soon as a little fruit appears, you want to eat it right away, or you’re not going to get the ripe fruit. And you’re not going to have anything really edible. So you stay here with the breath, knowing that right here, where you are present with the breath, is where all the good things are going to appear. Now, they may not appear yet because you’re not ready for them. Many things are already here, but you’re not sensitive enough to see them. In some passages, they talk about this as being a very gradual path. In other passages, it’s very sudden. The Buddha’s images of the continental shelf off of India. It slopes out gradually, and then there’s a sudden drop. The gradual slope is the practice of getting more and more sensitive to what’s actually happening right here, and also getting more and more sensitive to what it means to practice the Middle Way, to know when you’re putting too much pressure on things and when you’re not putting enough pressure on things. That’s the sort of sensitivity you can develop only through trial and error. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about the seven aspects of a person of integrity. The first two are that you know the Dhamma and you know the meaning of the Dhamma. Those are the sort of things you can study, that you can learn from asking, discussing. But the rest have to do with your own sensitivity. There’s having a sense of yourself. What are your strengths right now? What are your weaknesses right now? Where are you right now in the practice? What are you capable of doing? What would it mean to push yourself too hard? What would it mean to push yourself too softly? That you learn only through trial and error. Then there’s a sense of enough. How much food is enough? How much sleep is enough? How much sitting, walking? How much is enough? Again, you’ve got to learn that through trial and error. You’ve got to learn how to observe these things. You have to have a sense of the right time and place for things. How much time should be devoted to fixing up the monastery around you? How much time should be devoted to just focusing on the monastery inside you? And what’s the right time for all your various activities? What’s the time to talk? What’s the time not to talk? That you learn by trial and error. Then there’s having a sense of other people. When you meet with this group of people, how should you behave? When you meet with that group of people, how should you behave? And when you meet up with different people, how should you behave? What kind of activities are praiseworthy and what kind of activities are blameworthy? That you see in other people. Of course, this reflects back on yourself. The Buddha here is talking about the way people react to the Dhamma. Do they really listen or do they not listen? And even if they listen, are they really thinking things through or are they not? If they’re thinking things through, are they actually going to practice on them based on that? The Buddha was not the sort of person who would refuse to judge other people. He did judge other people according to how much they were really interested in the Dhamma. Because he, of course, was a teacher. He had to figure out who it was worth teaching and who it was not. Who was worth talking to about the Dhamma and who was not. You may not yet be a teacher, but there are times when you want to talk about the Dhamma. You have to figure out who you want to talk to. And you, better off not talking to. All these are things you learn only through trial and error, by developing your own sensitivity, posing that question in your mind, “Where am I in the practice?” And as I said, that means accepting where you are, but also accepting the fact that you’ve got some qualities that you’re developing, and having a sense of how much is enough practice, how much is too much, how much is too little, a sense of enough, a sense of the right time and place for things, and a sense of dealing with other people. These are the sorts of things that you learn gradually. You have to use your own powers of observation. It takes time. That’s the gradual part of the practice. The sudden part of the practice is when you see things that have been here all along, and it’s only when your sensitivities have gotten matured that you begin to sense, “Oh, I’m doing this, I’m doing that.” That’s unskillful. You’ll notice this as you get deeper and deeper into concentration. You’re in a certain level of concentration, and you begin to realize that that level of concentration is still not totally at peace. It’s still not totally still. It still has some level of stress. Then you figure out what you’re doing that’s causing that stress. As you stop that activity, the stress goes away, and you go into a deeper level of concentration. For instance, as you’re evaluating the breath, there comes a point where you can’t get it any better than it is. And if you try to keep on evaluating, you’re just spinning your wheels. That’s when you content yourself with what you’ve got and you can settle into it in a much deeper and more absorbed way. You actually become more one with the object of your meditation. You were controlling the breathing in the past. Now, all of a sudden, it’s just the breath is breathing you. You’re one with the breath. There’s a greater sense of rapture, a greater sense of refreshment and ease that come when you’re ready to put aside the direct thought and evaluation and so on down through the levels of concentration. This becomes possible because you become more and more sensitive to what’s actually here, what’s actually going on. Things have been going on all the time, but you just haven’t noticed them because your sensitivity hasn’t been developed enough. So that’s the sense in which there’s a gradual slope leading to a sudden drop-off. The real sudden drop-off, of course, is when you have your first experience of the deathless. That’s a radical change. But it comes from this practice of trying to be sensitive to what’s going on. And as you focus on these issues of staying with the breath, being mindful, being alert, having a sense of how much pressure to put on the practice, how much is too much, how much is too little, your sensitivity grows. You become more observant and then you start seeing things you didn’t see before. That’s where the breakthroughs are sudden. There’s a lot to learn here. This is why when the Buddha was talking about meditation, he would always compare it with different skills. As with any skill, the teacher can teach you the basic steps, but to get really good at it requires you to do that skill over and over and over again. So you get a better sense of what works and what doesn’t work, and you develop your own powers of observation. You don’t have to go running to the teacher. You don’t have to deal with every little problem, because your own powers of observation become more reliable. So you accept where you are, but you don’t accept that you’re going to stay here. At least you’re not going to stay here with the same level of crudeness. You want to sensitize yourself more and more to what’s really going on here. There’s actually an awful lot going on in the present moment. You might be sitting here with a breath and it doesn’t seem like much is happening, but that’s simply because your level of sensitivity is enough. Look more carefully. Watch to see how the level of stress in the mind rises and falls. When it falls, what did you just stop doing? When it rises, what were you starting to do? Try to catch yourself. So in one way, you’re not going anywhere at all. You’re staying right here. But you’re seeing more right here. What’s right here begins to open up. So accept the fact that you’re going to stay here, but that you’re not going to stay here with the same level of crudeness where you are right now. There are good qualities to develop, and if you’ve got the potential, don’t be ashamed of it. Aim not to develop that potential. So accept the fact that you’ve got some work to do, because that’s how the meditation becomes special. As the Buddha said, ultimately you get to the point where you see things you’ve never seen before and realize things you’ve never realized before. That requires that you be observant to a level you’ve never been before. So accept that you’ve got some duties in the meditation and do your best to see them through.

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