Expanding Your Skill Set

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There’s that tension in the chants we had just now. On the one hand, the chant says the world has no protection, no shelter. One has to pass on leaving everything behind. And the chants then say, “May I be happy. May I be free from stress and pain. May you forever be well.” What those chants do is recognize that the desire for happiness is something to be honored. But if you’re looking for happiness outside, you’re looking in the wrong place. Out in the world of the senses, there are pleasures to be had, but happiness is lasting. You’ve got to look within to see what skills you can develop to foster the properties of the mind, the resources, the potentials in the mind that can lead to true happiness. So we’re here because we do honor that desire for happiness. And we take it seriously, not in a grim way, but simply realizing that if you want to be happy, there are certain skills you’ve got to develop. It’s going to take time, it’ll take energy, but the time and energy are well spent. So what are these resources? You’re sitting here with a body that’s breathing, and you’ve got your mind that’s thinking and aware. And for these resources to develop, you have to bring them together. It’s like planting a seed in the soil and giving it water and sunlight. If the seed is in one place, the soil is someplace else. If the sunlight is someplace else, the seed’s not going to grow. But when you put these things together, then the seed does grow. So you bring your awareness and you bring your thinking to the breath. Try to keep the breath in mind. That’s a property of mindfulness, reminding yourself of what’s in your mind. What’s important to pay attention to? What’s important to remember? And for the time being, there’s only one thing you really have to worry about, and that’s staying with the breath coming in, with the breath going out, noticing where you feel the breath, the process of breathing. So it’s not just the air coming in and out of the nose, but it’s the movement of the body that allows the lungs to expand. And the other is the movement of energy in the body that goes along with it. That’s breath energy. So wherever you notice it—it might be the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest, the shoulders—wherever you can keep track of the feeling of the breathing, allow your attention to settle right there. And keep it focused in a way that feels just right, not putting too much pressure on it, but also not being so light that you slip away easily. A traditional image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze the chick, you kill it. If you hold it too loosely, the chick will fly away. So you’ve got to hold it just right to keep it right there. And see if you can notice what rhythm of breathing feels good right now. You might try experimenting with some good long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how that rhythm feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. You can experiment with shorter breathing, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. And see the effect that the different kinds of breathing have on the body and the effect they have on the mind. Some ways of breathing are easy to follow, and other ways of breathing are easy to lose. So think of this as a time to experiment, to learn what’s just right for the body, just right for the mind. Remind yourself that if you find a rhythm of breathing that feels good, it’s going to be good for the body. After all, the breath is the basic energy of life. And if that energy is tight and constricted, limited, it can’t give its full benefits to the body. But if it feels good coming in, feels good going out, feels satisfying, gratifying, it can help it have a good effect on the body. In this way, the training of the mind is also helpful. The mind slips off, bring it back. That’s how you strengthen your mindfulness. You couple it with alertness, noticing what’s happening. And those two qualities are developed by qualities called ardency. You really pay full attention to what you’re doing. In other words, when the mind has slipped off, as soon as you catch it slipping off, bring it back. You don’t have to tie up the loose ends of your thoughts. And if it was a fascinating thought, you don’t have to remember it. If it’s really worthwhile, it’ll come back to you later. Right now is time to develop this new skill, which is learning how to stay with the breath as continuously as possible. If the mind wanders off again, bring it back again. Try not to get frustrated. Just be firm but gentle. And each time you come back, ask yourself, “What was wrong with the breathing just now? In what way was it not as comfortable as it could be?” You can just pose a question to the mind, “What would one really good breath feel like right now?” And see how the body responds. All these qualities will help you. The act of working together, mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, are what help to establish mindfulness. And the act of establishing mindfulness, that’s the basic theme of your meditation, the theme of concentration. Mindfulness and concentration work together. While you’re with the breath, ardency means trying to be as alert as possible. As sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Once it feels good in the spot you’ve chosen as your main point of focus, you can explore how it feels in other parts of the body as well. The idea being that you want to work up eventually to being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and allowing the effect of the breath to be as good as possible on the body. You can do it section by section or just take the whole thing all at once. See what works best for you. And as you get more and more skilled at this, you add a very important skill to your skill set. It’s the ability to stay focused on the breath and to help improve the breath energy in the body. It’s something you do not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You can do it in other places as well. When you’re out walking around, when you’re dealing with other people, you find that it’s a really valuable tool to have. It keeps the mind grounded, gives you a sense of inner stability, inner solidity. Even when the situation outside is very uncertain, you’ve got a good place to stay. And you’re coming from a position of strength. That in itself is important, because most of the unskillful things we do in life are when we feel threatened. We feel weak in the face of a particular danger. And we just grab at whatever comes to mind to get rid of that feeling of weakness, that feeling of danger. And often it’s very unskillful. But if you have the sense of solidity inside, then when things outside are difficult, you don’t feel quite so threatened. You’ve got at least one spot inside, or one area inside, where things are still okay. The breath can come in, go out, and you still feel all right. It feels comfortable. Whatever feelings of tension or tightness or disease may be coming along, you don’t have to let them totally affect the body. You can have your beachhead here. When the breath feels good, you’re okay. You’re not threatened. And from that position, you’re a lot more likely to do the skillful thing, say the skillful thing, think skillful thoughts, and not just be reactive. This expansion of your skills is very important. The Buddha is talking about the way you create a sense of self. It all has to do with your desire for happiness and your particular desires. And you’ll have particular ways of constructing a sense of self, one for each different kind of desire. So there’s a sense of self that you create. That can act as the producer of that happiness you’re looking for, in other words, based on whatever powers you sense you have. Your ability to control your body, your ability to use the mind, your ability to influence situations around you. That’s the producer. Then there’s the consumer, your sense of self that’s going to experience the happiness that you want. So our sense of self is basically a strategy, or our senses of ourselves are strategies. And the wider our range of skills, the more successful those strategies are going to be. The Buddha actually has you use your way of constructing a sense of self as an important part of the path. He talks about the self as a kind of conceit. And here, conceit doesn’t mean pride. It just means the sense of “I am.” It might be “I am better,” or “I am worse than other people,” or “I’m equal to other people.” All of that counts as conceit. And we’re told that it’s useful to develop a skillful sense of conceit, i.e., you see that other people can practice, other people can attain results from the practice. They’re human beings. You’re a human being. They can do it. Why can’t you? That kind of confidence is essential. And you want to work on it, and it’s healthy and perfectly legitimate. Then there’s what the Buddha calls self as a governing principle. As you embark on this practice, you realize you’re going to have to give up certain pleasures as you work on the mind. But you realize that you’re doing it for the sake of a higher pleasure, something more solid, something more reliable, something with more substance. And if you ever find yourself tempted to give up, you ask yourself, “Do you really love yourself? What kind of happiness do you want to attain?” You say, “I want something that’s solid and sure.” Okay. Then work on that. Don’t give up on that idea. The Buddha has you really honor your sense for genuine happiness. Society outside tends to dismiss this idea, saying, “Well, genuine happiness or true happiness, unconditional happiness, that’s nothing you can do for yourself. Either someone else has to provide it for you, or it’s just totally impossible. In which case, why don’t you buy our car or buy our product? Take a little pleasure along the way instead of worrying about something bigger, more important.” And you can’t let yourself give in to that kind of thinking. If you really care about yourself, you want happiness that’s reliable. If you don’t want happiness, it’s going to turn on you and leave you end up more disappointed than before, which is the way most forms of pleasure in the world deliver. So this is called the self-as-a-governing principle. It stays in charge of your practice. And then there’s the reality check, what the Buddha calls having a genuine sense of yourself, where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are. When you realize that certain skills need to be developed for true happiness, you look at yourself. Do you have those skills? If you don’t have them yet, then you work on them. It’s also useful to look at your position in a particular situation. If you have something to tell somebody, someone else, but they don’t seem responsive, you realize, “Okay, I don’t have the authority yet to convince that person.” Just let it go. This gets coupled with what the Buddha calls a sense of time, which really means a sense of time and place. What’s the right thing to do right now? What’s the right thing to say right now? And the more skills you can bring to that, the wider range of your abilities in any particular situation. So the skill of learning how to train the mind, keeping it focused, keeping it mindful, is an important addition to your set of skills. It can actually form a foundation for learning how to use your various skills in a wise and effective way. It allows you to stand back from the ways you might normally react, from the various senses of self that you’re used to producing but may not be all that helpful. You can step back and say, “Do I really need to identify with that idea? Do I really need to identify with that way of acting?” There might be something better. This opens up more possibilities. It makes you realize you do have choices. Your self is not a static, given thing. Your sense of self is something you keep creating. That’s a wider range, and the more skills you can develop. But one of the things that develops those skills is having a very realistic sense of where you’re not skilled, so you know what you have to work on, where you don’t have certain abilities yet. You realize, okay, this is something that needs developing, this is something that needs work. I may not yet be proficient in this particular area, but you look around, what other skills do you have? Physical skills, mental skills, social skills? Do you want to expand your range? This is a really good skill to have as the general governing principle, this ability to stay mindful, to be alert, because then you can judge the results of how your different strategies are working. It allows you to see them as strategies, as processes, and to gauge how effective they are. So the simple ability to stay with the breath, pay attention to the breath, explore what kind of breathing is comfortable, what kind of breathing is comfortable. It may seem like a small thing, but it’s not. Or even if it is a small thing, some small things are really important, because this is the little skill that holds all the other skills together. It allows you to develop these inner resources you have, so they actually do yield a happiness that’s not going to disappoint.

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