Working from Home

October 16, 2010

The Pali word we use for meditation, bhavana, literally means “to develop.” And it doesn’t apply only to sitting here with your eyes closed. We’re trying to develop good qualities in the mind. We’re trying to develop skillful activities, actually, in all of our areas of life—in what we do, what we say, what we think. But the important thing in what we do and say and what we say and think is the qualities in the mind. That’s when we think about developing. It’s primarily this activity. We’re sitting here meditating, trying to develop mindfulness, develop alertness, concentration, discernment—things that, when they are developed, then will have an influence in our activity outside. What we’re doing is not important only because of what we say and what we think, or its impact on what we say and what we think. The mind is the primary focus in all the training. When the Buddha talks about the four noble truths, it’s the suffering of the mind, suffering caused by the mind. That’s the suffering he’s focusing on. So as we meditate, we’re giving primary importance to issues of the mind, which means that we have to put aside our sense of the importance of things outside, at least for the time being. And even when we return to those issues, we want to keep in the back of the mind that the mind is, even though it’s there in the back sometimes, it’s not of backmost importance. It’s always of foremost importance. So one of the things you have to make up your mind as you sit down to meditate is that whatever issues that are related to activities in the world, whatever projects you have going, whatever issues you have with other people, right now they’re of no importance. You want to focus total importance on what’s happening in the mind right now, the activity of the mind. Because it’s the activity of the mind that shapes your experience, both what you take in through the senses and then what comes out in terms of your thoughts and your words and your deeds. And if you’re not conscious of that, the role that the mind plays in shaping these things, you can get yourself into a lot of trouble, cause a lot of suffering. So we’re going to consciously shape a state of concentration. It’s a kind of becoming. And, as we all know, one of the purposes of the practice is to overcome becoming, but you have to use it. And the only way you can overcome it is to get really good at doing it. You really understand it that way. You can see the mind in action. And when you’re seeing the mind in action, that’s when you’re able to get past its unskillful actions and ultimately get past actions entirely. So you hear the issues of the mind, which ordinarily take back seat to everything else, are suddenly brought into the foreground. As we’re paying attention to something that usually gets ignored, we’re paying attention to the breath. And we’re paying attention to the mind’s ability to stick with something really simple, like the breath. And any other thought that comes up right now is irrelevant. One way of getting the mind into that state is to follow the pattern of the night of the Buddha’s awakening. He first gained knowledge into his past lives, many, many, many lives. But then he didn’t stop there. The question was the fact that he had many lives. Was he the only person that this happened to? Or does it happen to everybody? And how does it happen? Why does it happen? Is there any pattern? And to see the pattern, he had to think about all beings over a long period of time. That’s when he had a second knowledge of seeing beings dying and being reborn. And seeing the larger pattern, he saw it was because of their actions. It was based on their intentions, based on their views, based on their respect or lack of respect for noble ones. And then when he saw that intention was the important element, then on the third watch of the night, he focused in on his intentions in the present moment to see how they were creating suffering, or how they could be used to put an end to suffering. And that’s when he gained full awakening. So he took that larger view for a while to put everything into perspective. And then he could focus in on the present moment. So sometimes when the details of your daily life are barging in on your meditation, you try to focus on the breath, and it seems like they can’t move in fast enough to swamp the mind. It’s good to take that larger view for a while and realize, “Here we are training the mind in the context of whole life, in the context of what life is like here on earth.” Make the context as large as you can so that the details of your daily life can be put into perspective. And you realize that the issues of the mind are the most important ones. Because this is what gets carried over, the qualities of the mind. We’re always developing qualities of the mind, either skillful ones or unskillful ones. This process of going for a particular way of thinking, a particular way of acting, siding with certain traits in the mind, that actually develops them. Often we don’t think of ourselves consciously as developing anything in the mind. It’s just what the mind does. But it’s a fairly certain thing that if you’re not consciously developing good qualities, the mind tends to go back to its old, lazy qualities, and it’s developing them. So you have to ask yourself, “What do you want to develop?” Here you have this little bit of time as a human being. What do you want to do with that time? What’s the most important thing you can focus on? It has to come down to the mind. So once you’ve got that set of priorities straight, then you can focus in on the present moment and give it your full attention. So if anything else comes up in the course of the meditation, you can remember, “Oh, this is really small. This is really minor.” It’s not nearly as important as developing the good qualities of the mind, the ability to give the mind some peace and quiet so it can see things for what they really are. And you do want to work on both sides. One, giving the mind the peace and quiet, and two, seeing things for what they are. Especially when the work of the day is really oppressive and you want a place to just chill out. It’s very easy to focus on concentration simply as a place to chill out and to hang out, rest, get away from the world for a while. And you really don’t like to think about the idea, “Well, there’s work to be done in here.” And in the beginning, the work is just that, settling down, finding various techniques to keep the mind from getting distracted, and developing a sense of ease and well-being here in the present moment so it gets easier and easier to stay here, more inviting to stay here. It’s like moving into a new house. You put in the kind of furniture you like, paint the walls the colors you like, and you find yourself more and more inclined to come back to this new house and really feel at home. But it turns out that this home here is not just a place to rest. It’s also a place to work. The work here is trying to understand what’s going on in the mind, to catch the mind as it’s creating stress, creating suffering. See what choices it’s making. It means you have to be very alert. These are the three qualities the Buddha talks about as you’re getting the mind to settle down. There’s mindfulness, i.e., keeping your topic of meditation in mind. Then there’s alertness, watching what’s actually going on. Then there’s the quality of ardency, of trying to do this skillfully. When you bring all those together, the mind will settle down. And that quality of alertness is what’s going to help you. It’s going to get sharpened, because you have to learn how to look for the little things in the concentration, rather than looking at the great big sufferings of life. The Buddha has you get the mind really sensitive and really quiet so you can see the little ones. Because the big ones come from the little ones. He wants to heighten your sense of sensitivity. And living in the world, we tend to get really desensitized to the subtle things going on in the mind. Because from the point of view of the work we have to do, these sensitivities just get in the way. That’s a lot of what the work of the world is about. It’s saying, “You can’t let your feelings have a large role. You’ve just got your duty. You’ve got to do it. Don’t let your feelings get in the way. You may be sick, you may be depressed, whatever. You’ve just got to do your work.” So we tend to desensitize ourselves to the little things. This is one of the reasons why in the monasteries there’s a real emphasis on being very careful, very meticulous in how you do things, how you care for your things, how you care for the place. You’re more and more likely to notice things. John Fuhring gives the example of keeping your house very, very clean. He said that the least little bit of dust that settles in the house, you’re going to notice it right away. It’s the same with training the mind. We want to look for those little bits of dust, the first signs of greed, the first signs of anger, the first signs of delusion. Because that’s how they come originally, just little bits of dust. But if they’re allowed to collect over time, then they become larger and larger. And this is where the analogy falls down, because dust doesn’t grow. It’s more like little seeds that get blown in on the wind. If there’s any dirt in any of the corners of the house, the seeds can settle in the dirt, and then they can grow. So as you keep the mind clean, one, it gives less opportunity for these seeds to grow, and two, you’re more likely to notice them as soon as they come to you. So when we’re working on getting the mind quiet, it’s all too common that the mind begins to drift off and just wallow in the pleasure, wallow in the ease. We want to get just a sense of rest and recovery. And we have to respect that, because sometimes the mind really needs that. But there comes a point when we say, “Look, we can’t just wallow here in the pleasure.” As the Buddha said in an important part of his meditation, it was not to allow his mind to get overcome either by pain or by pleasure. Realize that you have to learn how to use them. And here, the using of the pleasure helps to stabilize the mind in the present moment, get things nice and quiet, so that when little seeds or grains of dust or dirt come in, you’re going to notice them. Then you realize that these seeds are things that you can either choose to allow to grow, or you can get rid of them. You do have the choice. It’s not inevitable. The mind does not have to have greed, it doesn’t have to have aversion, it doesn’t have to have delusion. We allow these things to move in and get planted again and again and again, to the point where it seems like that’s the nature of the mind. What we’re trying to do is get the mind quiet, quiet enough to realize that you are making choices. Once you see the choices happening, then you’re free to the point where you can actually try to do them skillfully as well. So we’re here both to get the mind quiet, but also to develop this quality of alertness, to look after the quietness of the mind. In the beginning, it means just basically protecting it. As soon as the mind is going to wander off, you say, “Nope, let go of that thought. Wherever it’s going to go, that’s its business. You don’t have to worry about it.” What you have to be alert to is the mind’s tendency to move after these things. Again, it’s choices that it’s making. So try to be as alert as possible as you’re staying with the breath. Remember, you have to protect this. If there’s going to be more than just a chilling out, the alertness is what’s going to make the difference. Then mindfulness comes in to remind you to stay alert. Stay alert. Stay alert. Stay alert. In addition to staying with the breath, but also stay alert. And the effort you put into that, that’s the ardency. So this is what we’re developing as we meditate, this cluster of skillful mental states, both for the sake of giving the mind a place to rest, gain some ease, to heal the wounds that it suffers as it goes through the day, but also to give it a good place to work. It’s like building a house and having a home, and then having an office in your home. You can work from home. So it’s not just a place to rest, but it’s also a place to get important things done.

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