Skills You Need

May 3, 2011

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, as if the breath were cleaning the cobwebs out of your mind, opening all the energy channels. So anything uncomfortable, anything tight or tense, can just flow out of your system. And as long as long breathing feels good, keep it up. But try to notice what kind of rhythm really does feel best for the body at any one time. What kind of rhythm feels good for the mind? Sometimes the breath can get very subtle while you’re sitting here. And if your range of awareness is too small, it can put you to sleep. In cases like that, you want to breathe a little bit more heavily and, at the same time, watch the whole body as your frame of reference. Find one spot in the body that’s most congenial for being your focal spot. It could be the tip of the nose, the middle of the forehead, the middle of the head, the throat, the middle of the chest, the tip of the sternum, above the navel. Those are a few of the main spots. Try focusing on each of these for a while and see which one seems most congenial. When you’ve found one you like, let your awareness settle there, and then allow it to spread throughout the whole body. Then have a sense of how the breathing feels throughout the whole body. Before you fully settle in, you may want to check the body. Start up the torso, go down the back, out the legs, out the arms, to see if there’s any tension or any place where you’re holding on to tension or any tightness in the body. And make a point of allowing it to relax all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Keep surveying the body like this until you feel ready to settle down. You’ve gone through all the nooks and crannies, all the little corners, the tips of the fingers, the tips of the toes. Then choose your point to settle down. And think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. Try to maintain that whole body awareness as long as you can. If you notice any spots of tension or tightness developing in the body again, think of the breath energy breathing right through them, untangling them, untying the knots. Then go back to your center, like a spider on a web. A fly comes into the web and the spider moves over. It gets the fly, wraps it up, and then goes back to its spot. But in this case, you’re not wrapping things up. You’re actually unwrapping them, opening them up. You’re trying to create a sense of openness here in the body, so that the body is a good place to stay. Otherwise, the mind is going to wander off. It doesn’t like staying in a confined or narrow place. It wants some freedom. So you give it freedom here in the body. Allow it to be expansive in the body, but don’t go too far beyond the skin, just enough to look at the energy flows in the different parts of the body. Sometimes you may sense an energy flow around the body. That’s fine, too. Otherwise, don’t go wandering off. Because you’re trying to get to know a really important spot, i.e., your awareness right here in the present moment. This is where your life is shaped. There are influences coming in from the past, but those influences were set into motion in the present, in what was then the present. Those influences you can’t do much about, but you can work on your present awareness. The more open and expansive it is, the better the mood of the mind, both as it encounters karma from the past in terms of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, feelings of pleasure or pain, and as it makes its choices about what it wants to do. Because it’s how you shape these experiences in the present moment that determines whether you’re going to be suffering from pain or you’re going to be enjoying pleasure, and what kind of pain or what kind of pleasure it’s going to be. And when the Buddha talks about the cessation of karma, he doesn’t talk about trying to get rid of your old karma or burning off your old karma. You’re learning how to bring these intentions in the present moment to a more refined level. Finally, the mind attains such equipoise and such balance that it can just drop its intentions in the present. That’s when you open up to a new dimension. So the things you want to look at are right here. These are the important factors that shape your experience. They allow for freedom or keep you bound, depending on how well you handle them. So you want to look at your actions right here. See what you’re capable of in terms of alertness, attention, concentration, discernment. Then it’s good that you’re getting started now, rather than waiting to next month, next year, next lifetime. Because things don’t get easier with time. The body starts to fail. The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, all these things can wear down. Sometimes you think, “Oh, I’ve really learned what aging is about.” You notice that this level of energy you’re having today is a lot lower than it would have been last year. Well, the thing is that it starts getting lower and lower as you go on with time. So take advantage of what you’ve got right now. Make the most of what you’ve got. It’s like exercising a muscle. If you don’t use it, you lose it. It’s the same with the strength of your mind. If you don’t try to keep fighting off sensual passion, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, your strength of mind will begin to falter. It’ll begin to wane. It’s in putting up a fight against these things that you strengthen the mind. Sometimes you actually have to focus on a particular defilement. Other times the defilements don’t seem to be moving in. Then you can focus on strengthening your good qualities, i.e., emphasize the positive. Here’s your chance to develop your ardency, your alertness, your mindfulness, your heedfulness, your genuine compassion for yourself and the people around you. Because mindfulness allows you to develop a happiness that doesn’t need to place a burden on anybody at all. You’re not burdened by this happiness. No one else is burdened by this happiness. It’s a really excellent form of happiness. So it’s really worth giving it your full attention, doing your best to develop here. The qualities that’ll lead to making that happiness really solid and secure. So even though focusing on the breath may not seem to be focusing on the larger issues like that, it’s an important step in the right direction because it brings the mind into the present world where all these choices are being made. When you’re with the breath, you’re with the present. When you’re not with the breath, you can’t be sure. But with the breath, there’s no future breath you can watch, there’s no past breath you can watch. It’s only the breath right here. That’s what keeps you anchored. And if you’re anchored with a sense of well-being, it’s a lot easier to stay anchored. You don’t have to go slipping off. And the choices you make now will have an impact both right now and on into the future. The more skills you develop now, the more skills you have to deal with the issues of aging, illness, and death as they arise. None of us knows what kind of illness will take hold, how our body will age, which parts will wear out first, which parts will wear out later, how death will come. But we do know that we will need mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment to deal with these issues as they arise. So we can develop those in advance. That’ll be our contribution. At that point, this will be past karma, but right now it’s present karma. So you want to make a lot of good present karma while you’ve got the chance. It’ll make it easier to deal with difficult things when they arise. People sometimes complain about Buddhism. It talks so much about suffering, pain, illness, death, all these negative things. Well, the reason we talk about it is because there’s a cure. And so we can talk openly about it. It’s like a doctor who knows he has the cure for a particular illness. He’s not afraid to talk about it, or he’s not afraid that the patient will show the symptoms. The symptoms come up, okay, the doctor has the medicine. Years back, we had a man come here with his wife. He had all these diagrams drawn on his cheek. It turned out he was going to go in for some radiation on a cancer. And his doctors had told him there was an 80 percent chance of success. What they didn’t want to talk about was that 20 percent. What do you do when it doesn’t succeed? So that’s what I told him. “This is what we’ve got to talk about here. I can’t talk to you about the 80 percent, but I can talk to you about the 20 percent.” His wife started crying. She didn’t want to think about it. But this was precisely what he wanted to hear about. Because if all anybody talks about is the 80 percent, then you wonder what horrors and terrors lie lurking in that 20 percent chance of things not working. And the Buddha has skills. He has wisdom. He has techniques. He has attitudes you can develop that enable you to deal with that 20 percent. Because, after all, ultimately that 20 percent will become 100 percent at some point. We’re all going to die at some point. The thing is, you can do it skillfully or unskillfully. It’s much better to do it skillfully. You impose less suffering on yourself, you impose less suffering on the people who are caring for you. So these are important skills you want to develop. This is why we have that reflection so often. “I’m subject to aging, illness, death, subject to separation.” All of which sounds pretty depressing. But then we move on to the last reflection, “I’m the heir to my actions,” which means that you have some choice right now in the extent to which you’re going to suffer now and on into the future, in the extent to which you’re going to find pleasure, happiness, true well-being now and on into the future. That does lie in your power. So try to make the most of that power, because it really can help.

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