Skillful Attachments

June 27, 2011

It’s good to start each meditation session with a determination that you’re going to stay with the breath. Try to abandon any other thoughts that pull you away from the breath, and encourage the thoughts that allow you to stay here, help you to stay here. Work with the breath, try to find a way that it feels really good. If experimenting doesn’t seem to come up with anything especially good, we’ll pose the question, “How would the body like to breathe? What would it like to do on its own?” and see what kind of response you get. But do everything you can to stay with the breath. Don’t try to clamp down too hard on it because that’ll make it uncomfortable. Just keep tabs on the breath all the way in, all the way out. This requires desire, and it’s going to involve some attachment, and it’s going to involve deciding which thoughts to identify with and which ones not to identify with. In other words, you’re going to be working on a sense of self here, all of which seems to fly in the face of what we’ve heard about the Buddhist teachings. After all, desire is bad, efforting is bad, attachment is bad, self is bad. But the Buddha never said those things. He was a lot more specific. He didn’t deal in such broad generalizations. There are skillful and unskillful desires, skillful and unskillful attachments, a skillful sense of self and an unskillful sense of self, or many skillful and unskillful senses of self. And so it’s important as we practice that we learn how to be specific, make these distinctions, because otherwise it becomes impossible to practice. Like with a sense of self, you need a healthy sense of self to give you the motivation to get started and the practice to begin with. Realizing that you’re going to benefit from this practice, after all, the Buddha said, you do this for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness. The question that lies at the beginning of wisdom is, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Notice that question includes the words “I” and “my.” So that’s part of your motivation, realizing on the one hand that you really do want to be happy and you want a happiness that doesn’t betray you, and that you’re going to have to depend on your own efforts. You have to have a sense of your own powers, the areas of your life in terms of your body and your mind that you can control, and the ones that you can’t. You have some control over your body, you have some control over your mind. So use that element of control to put yourself on the path. So that kind of self is healthy, that wants a genuine long-term happiness, and is willing to learn whatever needs to be learned in order to do it. We sometimes hear that pride is a bad thing, but then again, pride isn’t an element of the path. Healthy pride is the realization that there are other people who can do this. Why can’t I? That’s not the kind of pride that says, “Well, I’m already good.” It’s pride that says, “I’m willing to learn.” So you hold on to the breath with that desire in mind. Here again, the holding on is a skillful holding on. You take the five aggregates that usually involve suffering when we cling to them, and you learn how to cling to them first in a healthy way. Form is the breath. Feeling is the pleasure. Refreshment is the ease that you’re trying to give rise to as you stay with the breath. Perception is your perception of the breath energy in the body. Fabrication is the inner conversation that you’re dealing with as you deal with the breath. As you evaluate the breath, try out different ways of allowing it to be comfortable. Then try to maximize the benefits you get from whatever pleasure you get from the breath, in other words, allowing it to spread throughout the body. All of this requires thinking, which again can be a detriment to the meditation if you don’t do it right, but an actual help if you do it skillfully. And then finally there’s consciousness, the awareness of all these things. So you’re going to cling to these things, but you cling to them as a path, not so much trying to identify yourself with them. Think of them more as the tools you can use that eventually you’ll be able to put aside when the job is done. And as for anything that comes up in the mind that’s unskillful, you want to learn how to abandon it and try to prevent it from coming up in the first place if you can. If it’s there, though, you try to abandon it. As for the skillful qualities of the mind, you do what you can to give rise to them and then to develop them. All of this requires desire. You have to be motivated. You have to want to do this. So it’s in this way that your sense of self, desire, attachment, the effort you put into this can be skillful. It’s important that you make these distinctions, because otherwise you look at your life and you say, “Oh, I’m being too selfish or being too much engaged in selfing.” You’ve got to stop that. But then if you stop that, you find you can’t function. Or if you give up at the beginning of the practice and say, “Well, I’ll just allow whatever happens to happen. That’ll be just it.” That can take you a little ways, but not very far. It’s like trying to clone awakening. You hear about awakened people being totally free of desire, free of attachment. You say, “Well, I’ll try a little of that.” But you haven’t gotten to where they are. It’s like hearing about somebody who’s gone on a train to a beautiful location. Then you hear that they get off the train. You say, “Well, I’ll just get off the train and there I’ll be.” Well, no, you’re here. You haven’t gotten on the train yet. So as we practice the path, it is, after all, a fabricated path, but it’s leading us to something unfabricated, something that’s totally without conditions, that doesn’t require any desire. It doesn’t require any sense of self at all, because it’s already there, it’s already established. But to get there, we have to will the actions. We have to want to do these things. We have to hold to them. And we need that healthy sense of self that gives us the motivation to begin with and gives us the strength we need. Because the mind does feed on this healthy sense of self. It feeds on the states of concentration, of well-being, that you can fabricate on the path. It’s the food that allows you to stick on the path. It gives you the strength you need to make it all the way there. Once you’ve gotten there, then you don’t need that anymore. You can drop it. So as we practice, it’s important that we make these distinctions. Because otherwise we bind ourselves hand and foot and never can get anywhere. But if you make these distinctions, they can see you all the way through. It’s like that Brahmin who went to see Ananda one time. He asked Ananda, “What’s the purpose of this practice?” And Ananda said, “One of the purposes is the overcoming of desire.” The Brahmin said, “How do you do that?” And Ananda listed the four bases of success. They include desire, persistence, intent, and using the mind’s powers of analysis. The Brahmin immediately said, “Well, that’s impossible. You can’t use desire to put an end to desire.” So Ananda asked the Brahmin, “Well, before you came here to the park, did you have the desire to come to this park?” And the Brahmin said, “Yes.” In fact, it was by acting on the desire that he got to the park. Now that you’re here at the park, what’s happened to that desire? Well, it’s gone, because I’m here. And Ananda said, “In the same way, you can use desire to put an end to desire. You can use your attachment, you can use your sense of self, if it’s skillful, to take you to the place where you no longer need the attachment, you no longer need to create a sense of self.” So remember, it’s important to make a clear distinction between the path and the goal. And remember, you’re on the path. You’re on that raft going across the river. When you get to the other side, you put the raft aside. But as long as you’re crossing the river, you’ve got to hold on tight.

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