The Frontier Fortress

July 14, 2011

When we meditate, we’re trying to provide food for the mind. Because the mind’s usual food is not necessarily all that healthy. We feed off of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. We feed off of our ideas and intentions. And those kinds of food don’t necessarily give strength. Sometimes they sap our strength. If our intentions are unskillful, we start to demand that things be like this, be like that, and the mind actually becomes weak. It needs the outside world to be a certain way in order for it to be. We can’t be happy and can’t find happiness unless the world is that way. And as a result, we suffer. The mind gets weaker. It starts thrashing around. And even good things get turned into poison for the mind. So we have to realize that we have a big role in shaping our experience. We have a big role in basically fixing our food. So we want to learn how to do it well. This is one of the reasons why we start with the breath. Because it’s through the breath that we can shape our experience of the body. So take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice how you feel as a result of the breathing. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Pose that question in the mind. What rhythm and texture of breathing would feel good right now? Heavier or lighter? Faster or slower? Deeper or more shallow? And see how the body responds. Because the body contains a lot of sensations. And a lot of your experience of the present moment depends on which of those potentials you’re going to pay attention to, which ones you’re going to be feeding and emphasizing. So for the time being, try to emphasize all the pleasurable potentials you can find through the breath, reminding yourself that there is a pleasurable potential. There is a potential for pleasure. There’s a potential for a rapture and fullness, refreshment, right here in the body, simply through the way you breathe. In the beginning it may not seem like much, which means that you have to be patient and convinced that the potential is there. That’s when you find it. It’s like looking for a lost treasure. If you’re convinced that the item is here in the room, you’re going to keep on looking here in the room until you find it. If you have doubts about whether it’s here, you may not put much energy into looking here. You go wandering around someplace else. And even though the item is right here, you’re not going to find it. So learn how to convince yourself that the potential for a sense of well-being in the body is here. It may not be in the whole body, it may be just one part, but allow that to be your foundation. And in this way you’re beginning to direct your thoughts, you’re evaluating the breath. That’s another kind of food for the mind, another way of shaping your experience. Hold in mind the perception that the body has these potentials. That also helps to shape your experience. In this way you take your body as practice, a place where you can practice this principle that you are endowed with the ability to shape your experience. And here’s one piece of evidence to show that it can be done. Take these same skills and start applying them to other aspects of your life—your dealings with other people, your work, everything you encounter in terms of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas. There’s a certain amount of input that is beyond your control. But there’s a large area in which you can make a real difference. I have a student who’s a teacher who tends to get despairing about the fact that he’s ever going to enjoy teaching. You have to keep on reminding him, “Well, there is the possibility that you could become a better teacher.” Take the initiative and figure out ways to make it more interesting for yourself, more interesting for the students, and the experience will change. It may not be absolutely perfect, because you can’t control who’s going to come into the class, but you can set the tone for the room. And if you take a more proactive role like this, you change the experience for everybody. And the way you breathe does have an influence, because that sets the tone for the room. It’s the emotional tone for your mind. Your mind feeds an awful lot off of the inner sensation of the body. So as long as you can provide the mind with that amount of comfort, that amount of ease, refreshment, you find outside difficulties a lot easier to take. You find that you have an inner source of nourishment. The Buddha’s image for concentration is of stores of food. And a frontier fortress. The fortress is surrounded by dangers. There’s always the potential for an enemy attack. But as long as you’ve got a good store of food, you’ve got a source of strength for everybody else in the fortress. The soldiers are your effort in the practice. Mindfulness is your gatekeeper. This is an important principle to remember. Sometimes your mindfulness doesn’t work. It’s described as just an open, accepting awareness. But the Buddha’s description of mindfulness is of a very wise and skilled gatekeeper who lets in the right people and keeps out the people who should be kept out. In other words, you have a strong sense of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. And you keep allowing in the skillful impulses and the unskillful impulses. You keep it alive. You keep it at bay. This fits in with his description of the role of mindfulness in the path. Mindfulness keeps in mind the fact that there is right view and wrong view, right resolve and wrong resolve. So you can always keep in mind the fact that you want to abandon the unskillful factor and develop the skillful one. That’s your protection. Conviction is the foundation of the fortress, the conviction that this really will work, that you really do have the power to make a difference in your life. A discernment, they say, is a plaster covering on the outside walls. In other words, when the enemy tries to climb up your walls, this refers to greed, aversion, delusion, any of the hindrances. Sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety and uncertainty. If your wall is not plastered, they can get footholds here and there in the wooden construction. But if everything is plastered over, there are no footholds, no handholds. In other words, you try to train your mind so that when unskillful thoughts come in, they can’t gain entry. Because you don’t leave them any openings. You’re on the alert to notice. When greed comes in, or when despair comes in, what kind of thoughts do they capitalize on? How can they make inroads into your mind? At what point do you start agreeing with them and letting them in? We have to learn how to watch out for those ways of thinking and teach ourselves to think in opposite ways. The Buddha has a Dhamma talk on laziness and energy. He says there are eight different reasons for being lazy, and there are eight different reasons for being energetic. And the thing is, they’re all the same reasons, all the same situations. You can tell yourself, “I’ve been sick. Therefore I need to rest.” Or you can remind yourself, “I’ve been sick. I’ve started to recover a bit. I don’t know if I’m going to ever relapse, so I’d better practice well. I can. I’ve just come back from a journey. I’m tired.” That’s the argument for laziness. Then the argument for energy is, “While I was on the journey, I didn’t have time to practice, but now I’m here. I’ve got the opportunity to practice. Let’s make the most of it.” That’s the plaster for your walls. So every time laziness comes up with an argument, or excessive energy—sometimes you push yourself too hard—you have to watch out for that too. Learn how to recognize every unskillful thought and its reasonings, the ways in which it insinuates itself into your mind. And get practice in counteracting all those insinuations. So as soon as something unskillful comes up, you know it for what it is. And you know how to fend it off. This means that insight isn’t something that simply comes from noting things. You actually do have to think, you have to analyze, “How does that particular unskillful way of thinking make inroads into my mind? How can I counteract its reasonings?” This kind of analysis takes a fair amount of energy. This is why we need the concentration for our food. When you find that your analysis is not getting anywhere, you just remind yourself, “Well, this is not the time to tackle this particular problem.” You put it aside. Go back to your concentration. Give the mind time to feed. It’s like a person working. You might complain, “Well, while you’re eating, you’re not getting any work done.” But that’s missing the whole point. If the person doesn’t get to feed, he or she’s not going to be able to work or run out of energy. That’s when the time comes to rest. You let the mind rest in concentration. Give it the sense of well-being, the sense of fullness, the strength it needs, so it can learn how to go back and look at the unresolved problems that are still remaining there in the mind. And as your discernment gets better and better, you find that it takes less and less energy to cut through things. Your concentration gets stronger, and the path as a whole gets more solid. All of these things take time. This is why patience is such an important part of the practice, and also why conviction is important as well. Without conviction, you just give up. You say, “I can’t take this,” and start looking for an easier way out. But the problem is there are no easier ways out. They may seem easier on the surface, but they lead to long-term suffering down the line. Is that what you really want? If you’re really serious about true happiness, you have to say no. You want something solid that lasts, that’s not going to turn into something else. So this is why we focus on the breath, to give energy to the mind. To give the mind practice, to learn how to fabricate a present experience that really is nourishing, that really is energizing. This is when you know that your practice is going well, that as you do the practice you gain energy from it. It doesn’t string you out simply by the way you breathe. You should learn how to give a sense of well-being. A sense of fullness and refreshment, so that you can tap into it whenever you need. And as you get practice in creating this better sense of well-being in the body, a more solid sense of well-being, it does develop your discernment. It begins to confirm for you that principle that the present moment is not just a given that you have to put up with whatever comes your way. You have a role in shaping it, too. And you can learn the skill of shaping it more and more skillfully. So keep these principles in mind and put them to the test. It’s this combination of these two. The combination of having a clear sense of the principles of the practice and of the need to confirm them in practice. That’s how your practice is going to give the mind the nourishment it needs.

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