What You Bring

October 3, 2011

When the Buddha discusses the causes of suffering, stress, he doesn’t start with sight, sound, smell, taste, or tactile sensations. He starts with ignorance in the mind. And all the things we create in the mind that we then bring to sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, those are actually the causes of suffering. And so this is what we have to focus on as we meditate. This is what training the mind is all about. So we learn how to see what the mind is actually doing as it brings things to its experiences. Whatever fabrication, whatever perceptions, thoughts, whatever, that we’re bringing, we want to learn how to do that with knowledge. Because that’s how we can learn how to stop suffering. So even though we still see sights, smells, hear sounds, and whatever, we don’t have to suffer from them. Because they’re not the cause. The cause is what we’re bringing to our experience. And so what are these things we’re bringing? Part of what we’re bringing is the way we breathe. This is why the Buddha emphasized the breath as the basis for meditation more than any other topic. Because if you breathe in ignorance, it’s going to fashion the way you sense your body. And if you’re fashioning the way you sense your body in a way that’s leading to stress, a sense of constriction, a sense of discomfort, that’s going to color things immediately. So we don’t just let the breath do its own thing. We want to notice how the mind intentionally directs the breath and then try to direct it in a good way. The only way you’re going to learn about these processes is to learn how to do them consciously, deliberately. How to read the results. So as you’re focused on the breath, notice what kind of breathing feels good right now. Long breathing? How does that feel? How about short breathing? You can play. You can write deeper breathing, more shallow breathing, heavier, lighter. Think of the breath coming in and out of different parts of the body, in and out through the eyes. There’s not air, it’s more energy—the ears and from the back of the head, coming in the back of the neck and going down the spine. As the Buddha said, the important part of breath meditation is learning about what he calls bodily fabrication and learning how to calm it down. Now, you notice how your intentional element of breathing is affecting things? Learn how to adjust it so the breath feels soothing, gets refined. This is an important principle all the way throughout the practice. It’s not that we’re simply learning how to be equanimous about whatever comes up and trying not to react. That just drives a lot of these processes underground, where you can’t see them. If you really want to see these processes, you have to learn how to fabricate them skillfully. And this applies not only in the meditation, but as you go through life. Whatever situation you go to that you know is going to cause suffering, ask yourself, “What am I bringing into this situation that’s priming me to suffer? How am I breathing as I come into the situation? What thoughts am I holding in mind?” How am I framing the issues to myself? How can I do that in a more skillful way? These are the questions you want to bring. If you look at the story of the Buddha’s search for awakening, it was driven by questions like this. He noticed that he was doing things that were causing stress. He said, “Is there another way to do this? What would be an alternative approach?” He wasn’t just sitting there saying, “Well, whatever’s going to happen is going to happen. I’ll just watch it.” If that had been his attitude, we never would have heard of him. As a lot of the forester jhansas say, that’s the attitude of a water buffalo. They just sit there and endure, endure, endure. And I have yet to see a water buffalo get awakened. With chickens sitting on the nest, they can sit for hours. And it’s not the sitting for hours that makes a difference. It’s the questions you bring. Chickens don’t ask many questions, but human beings can. And these are the questions that really get you some places. What am I bringing to the situation? This is what all the different aspects of the teaching are about. You notice that when you go to a meditation retreat, things start out pretty quickly with mindfulness. In the Buddha’s own description of the path, there’s one passage where he’s talking to an accountant. You know how an accountant has a nice, neat mind and everything is nicely laid out. So he spoke about the path in a way that the accountant would understand. He talked about the different steps. You start with virtue, because your actions are really important. You want to see what you’re doing. Virtue is a principle of reminding yourself that there are certain actions that are going to be harmful no matter how you dress them up. So you don’t want to do them. Then you learn restraint of the senses. That’s where you’re beginning to watch not only your physical actions, but also your actions and your words, but also noticing when you look at something, why you’re looking. And you begin to realize that it’s not the case that you’re sitting there perfectly fine, and all of a sudden something comes that causes you to feel greed or causes you to feel anger. You’re usually out there looking for it, looking for something to get you stirred up, looking for something to entertain you, looking for something that can get you worked up, whichever motivation you have. And you begin to realize it’s not so much the things that you’re seeing or hearing or smelling or tasting, it’s why you’re going for them. And so you learn restraint. It’s only after several steps like this that the Buddha finally introduces the practice of mindfulness and alertness. He wants you to be sensitive to your actions, because these are the things you’re bringing, this process of fabrication. And as you adjust the body through the breathing, as you adjust your mind through the way you think about things, you decide what you’re going to look for. So this is why we play with the breath, experiment with the breath. But it’s also why the meditation is part of a much larger training. A lot of the training in the forest tradition starts with very simple things. How you clean a hut, how you clean out a spittoon, how you wash your robes. Little things like that. The whole purpose is to get you more observant, and not just observant of the present moment in general, but specifically observant about what you’re bringing to the situation. How much attention you’re paying, not only to your activity, but to your mind as you’re approaching it. And if you feel you’re above the details, you’re going to trip over everything. So you always want to look at the attitude you’re bringing when you find that something’s causing you suffering. Ask yourself, “Is it the thing that’s causing me suffering, or is it something I’m bringing to the thing?” Because this is what’s special about the Buddha’s teaching. It’s not the case that everything in your life has to go perfectly before you’re going to be happy. You can learn how to train the mind to approach things in such a way that, regardless of how they go, you don’t have to suffer. So that’s always the question you want to ask yourself. What am I bringing? What habits am I bringing? What habits can I change if I see that they’re causing suffering? This is a lesson that applies across the board, from the most basic steps of the practice all the way up to the top. So remember, it’s the questions you bring, the attitudes you bring, that make all the difference. If you bring the attitudes without questioning them, you’re never going to get anywhere. Or if you tell yourself, “I’m just sitting here noting, noting, or watching, watching, watching, and not doing anything,” everything gets driven underground. You’ve got to probe around. You’ve got to ask, “What are the assumptions I’m bringing? And what are the assumptions I don’t realize I’m bringing?” Because the mind does have this tendency to hide things from itself. That’s what ignorance is all about. It’s not simply a matter of being ignorant of the Buddha’s teachings. You can learn them in a few minutes. Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path. As Ajahn Lee once said, “If it was simply a matter of explaining the words, you could do everything within about three hours.” But if you really want to see the truth of these things, sometimes even three years isn’t enough, especially if you’re not looking in the right place. But if you ask the right questions, “What attitudes am I bringing? What way of breathing am I bringing?” Start with something really basic like that, because you’ll be amazed to see how much the breath has a huge impact on what you’re going to say, what you’re going to do, and what you’re going to think. So start here. Start exploring the breath. And as you work with the breath, you find that you’re thinking about it and evaluating it. You’re holding certain perceptions in mind that help you stay with the breath. Well, those mental processes—thinking, evaluating, perceiving—those have a huge impact on how you’re going to approach any other difficult issue in life. So as you learn how to see them in action and learn how to engage in them more skillfully, here with the meditation, it encourages you to be more skillful in how you apply these processes to everything else that you encounter. Because the mind’s not just a passive recipient of things. It’s out there, active. It’s the mind of a body that needs to feed and needs to look for things. It’s a searching mind. It wants to create situations. So ask yourself, “Are you doing that skillfully?” And if you’re not, if you’re finding that there’s stress or suffering, ask yourself, “What could you change?” The training of the mind is largely a factor of developing this inquisitive quality. It’s pointing it in the right direction. So do what you can to nurture this questioning mind, the mind that wants to know, the mind that wants to probe in. Watch what you’re doing. Understand why you’re doing it, what the results are, and how you might do it better. you

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