Remember This

April 9, 2012

When we meditate, there are two qualities that have to help each other along. One is sati, or mindfulness, and the other is sampajjana, or alertness. Mindfulness is the ability to remember, to keep something in mind. For instance, you’re trying to be alert to the breath, and so you try to remember that. But if you’re not alert, you miss out. Your initial intention isn’t carried through. And because it’s so easy to forget, you have to keep reminding yourself, “Stay here. Stay here. Be alert right here.” And as for alertness, it has to be sensitive not only to the breath, but also to whether you’ve actually forgotten. If you find yourself wandering off someplace else, you want to be able to recognize that and come right back to the breath, to catch the mind more and more quickly as it’s wandered off, hopefully to get to the point where you can catch it before it wanders off, when it feels inclined to get away from the breath. It hasn’t quite yet left the breath, but it’s about to go. If you can catch it then, so much the better. So you have to remember to be alert, and you have to be alert to see whether or not you’re actually remembering. This is why the two qualities go together. Actually, there’s a fair amount that you have to remember as you meditate. It’s not that you have to keep everything in mind all the time, but you have to have it nearby to pick up when you need it. If meditation were simply a matter of remembering and being aware, aware, aware, there wouldn’t be that much you’d have to remember. But meditation is a doing. It’s an activity. We’re following through on the duties with regard to the Four Noble Truths. We chanted the Dhammacakca just now, the Wheel of Dhamma, the Buddha’s first teaching. And it’s in that discourse that he sets out the framework for the whole teaching. You’ve got the Four Noble Truths, the truth of stress, its origination or cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. And he’s setting out these Four Noble Truths not so much as truths about four different things, but as four categories, four ways of analyzing your experience. Because each of the categories has a duty. You try to comprehend stress. In other words, you try to understand exactly where there’s stress right now and what is the stress, what is the suffering. And when you see it coming and going, that’s when you begin to gain a sense of how you can watch its cause and where to look for the cause. You look in the mind. There’s ignorance and there’s three different kinds of craving. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. The third truth, the cessation of stress, is the abandoning of any passion for those forms of craving. That’s something you want to realize. And as for the path, that’s composed of strategies for abandoning that passion. That’s something you want to develop, everything from right view all the way to right concept. So the truths are not something that just sits there. They give you directions. This is something you’ve got to do if you want to find true happiness. And they give you encouragement, the introduction to the sutta, where the Buddha talks about why you would want to look at things this way to begin with. It gives you motivation. It leads to true happiness. It leads to peace, to calm, to unbinding, to liberation. Why is it called a wheel? Because of the passage where the Buddha talks about the four truths. And then he says there are three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth. One is to know the truth, each of the truths. The next is to know the duty that’s appropriate for the truths. And then the third level is to know that you completed those duties. You’ve totally comprehended stress, you’ve totally abandoned its cause, you’ve realized totally the cessation of stress, and you’ve fully developed the path. So you’ve got four truths, three levels of knowledge. Back in the time of the Buddha, when you had a diagram like this, where you had different variables sorted out against one another, it was called a wheel. You went through all the permutations, all the way around, around the circle. So this is a wheel with twelve spokes. Four times three is twelve. That’s the framework for reminding us what we hear about, what we hear for. When we’re sitting here meditating, we’re working on that fourth noble truth, trying to develop the path. That means developing certain qualities and abandoning other ones. So as you’re here with the breath, anything unskillful comes up, you want to abandon it. Anything skillful comes, you want to maintain it. Give rise to it. This is what right effort is all about. You develop the desire and the intentness to abandon any unskillful things that have arisen, to prevent ones that haven’t yet arisen from arising, to give rise to any skillful qualities that have not yet arisen, and then to maintain the ones that have. That’s what we’re here for. So there are several duties here that we’re involved in. This is why we have to remember, because it’s so easy to forget. We’re sitting here working with the breath, and all of a sudden a butterfly flies past, and we follow the butterfly around, and it lands on a flower. And you look at the flower for a while, and then you look around, and you’re off someplace else entirely. You’ve forgotten what you were here for. Instead of developing the path, you’re developing something else. You’re abandoning the path, which is not the duty that we’re here for. That’s the first thing you have to remember. There’s this larger framework within which we’re practicing. Then we have to remember where to stay if we want to develop these good qualities. We’re trying to stay with the breath right now. Because the breath keeps you anchored in the present moment, it makes it that much easier to stay alert to what’s going on in the mind. If you didn’t have the body in the present moment as your anchor, it would be very easy to drift off again and not really know that you drifted off, because there’d be no clear frame of reference, point of reference. It’s like watching the movement of the clouds up in the sky. If you just lie on your back out in the middle of a meadow with nothing on the ground within your field of vision, you could watch the clouds and you wouldn’t really be sure. Are the clouds moving or are they not moving? Which clouds are staying still? Which ones are moving in which direction? It’d be hard to see, hard to know for sure. But if you have something that’s connected to the ground, like a post or the peak of a roof, you can use that as your frame of reference. That’s your point of reference. And then you know. Oh, the clouds are moving north, they’re moving south, they’re moving fast, they’re moving slow. You know. This is where we have the body as our frame of reference, the breath as our frame of reference, coming in and going out right here. That’s one thing you want to remember. This is the place where you want to stay centered, where you want to stay focused. That’s the first thing you’re doing. Because there are going to be other issues that come up. Something you’re going to do tomorrow suddenly comes into the mind, and part of the mind says, “Here’s a great period of time to think about that. You’ve got a whole hour. You could plan out the whole thing without any interruptions.” And it’s very easy to forget yourself and go off of that. And it’s very easy to believe the argument that this is something important to think about. This is where mindfulness comes in again, because it reminds us, “What can we do to not get carried away by those thoughts, not to believe them?” One is to remind yourself that you can think those thoughts any time, but the opportunity to be right here with the breath right now, that’s something hard to find. In other words, you remember your priorities, your motivation for why you’re here. The next thing to remember is the techniques that will help you stay here. All the things you’ve heard about adjusting the breath, evaluating the breath, allowing the breath energy to spread through the body so that there’s a sense of fullness, a sense of ease. Mix the breath a lot more interesting. And then there are the various techniques you’ve heard about and also put into practice yourself for dealing with distractions. It’s not the case that you simply watch the distraction and it will always go away. Sometimes you watch and you find yourself getting pulled in, pulled in. You can’t let that happen. Sometimes you have to look for ways to pull out of the distraction. One is simply recognizing that this is a distraction. That takes a lot right there, because it’s so easy to see a thought as something important, something worthwhile. But if you can simply recognize, “Okay, this is unskillful. It’s going in a place I don’t want to go,” you drop it and come right back. Other times you have to look at the drawbacks of the thought. Otherwise, it’s not going to go away. It keeps coming back. And it’s important when you’re looking at the drawbacks of the thought also to look for why you’re attracted to it to begin with. Say anger comes up in the mind. And part of you knows that it’s unskillful. But there’s another part that gets really interested in the anger, one particular story that’s got you worked up, one particular story that has you upset. You start feeding on the bad qualities of other people. And why do you do that? What’s the appeal? Is it so that you can make yourself feel better? That often is one of the causes. If you can look down on somebody else and you don’t feel so bad about yourself. But what kind of food is that? It’s not helping you. It’s not helping anybody else. So if you can see where the appeal is, then often it’s going to be something you’re embarrassed about. It’s important while you’re meditating to be ready to see some unattractive parts of your own mind. And remember, of course, that you’re not the only person who has those unskillful thoughts. The entire human race, except for the arahants, has unskillful thoughts. Here’s your chance to recognize them for what they are and to learn how to pull yourself out of them. If you’re not willing to recognize them, then you won’t be able to deal with them. So it is good to be able to recognize that, “Oh yeah, there is that really stupid reason for why I like to be angry, or why I like to feel lust, or why I like to feel greed.” And when you can recognize that it’s stupid, it’s a lot easier to put it aside. That’s another way of dealing with your thoughts. So there’s going to be a certain amount of conversation going on in this method. And it’s good to remember the techniques that have worked in the past, not because they will always work this time around, but at least to give yourself a handle. Sometimes you run through all your tools and you realize that the precise tool you need is not here right now, it’s down in Home Depot. So what are you going to do? Are you going to wait until tomorrow? No, you’ve got to jerry-rig something right now. This is where discernment gets developed as you develop concentration. When you realize that you need a new tool, a new approach, ask yourself, “What might possibly work?” “What have I not yet tried yet?” And see what comes up. And if you find something works, store that away in your memory. That’s something else you can use to remind yourself next time around. So you’re alert to what’s going on and you’re alert to what’s working. And if something works, you remember it. Here again is another way in which alertness and mindfulness help each other along. Other techniques for dealing with distraction include not paying attention to it. You know it’s there. Think of it as one member of the committee just kind of running off at the mouth. But you don’t have to listen, you don’t have to pay attention. You’ve got your own work to do. This is where the image of the mind as a committee is really useful. You don’t have to identify with the voice in the mind that’s telling you about those other distractions. You can just get back to work with the breath, and it can chatter along for a while. It’ll probably say some pretty outrageous things to get you interested, but you don’t have to pay attention. Sometimes it’ll say things to make you feel really bad about yourself. Don’t listen to that either. Just stick with your work. Then there are the thoughts that you begin to notice. When the thought comes in, there’s a pattern of tension in the body. This is why it’s really important to be sensitive to the breath energy in the body, so that when that kind of thought comes, you can be sensitive to it. You notice, “Okay, there’s this pattern of tension here. Breathe through it. Breathe through the tension.” And often the thought will just evaporate. It needs that pattern of tension to maintain a toehold. And if you deprive it of that toehold, it’ll go. Then there are the thoughts that are really, really persistent, and you haven’t figured out a way to get past them yet. They keep coming back. At that point, you stick your tongue against the roof of your mouth, you grit your teeth, and you say, “I will not think that thought.” You use the brute power of your will. That, too, is another one of the tools you need to remember. These are just a handful of the tools that might work. You have to figure out your own way. Your own strategies, your own tactics for dealing with distractions as they come. You also have to remember how to deal with pleasure and pain. You have to remember that when pleasure comes, you can’t simply lie there and enjoy it. When the breath gets pleasurable, think of spreading that pleasure around the body and let your awareness spread to fill the whole body, together with that sense of pleasure. Then do what you can to maintain that. You have to remember that the pleasure is not there for your simple enjoyment right now. It’s something to work with, it’s something to use, so you can strengthen your concentration. Learn how to work with the pleasure, and that’ll strengthen both your alertness and your mindfulness. If there are pains in the body, the first thing you have to remember is that you don’t have to focus on the pain. You can focus someplace else, especially when you’re not ready to focus on it. If you find that focusing on the pain makes it worse, back off. Find another spot in the body to stay focused, a spot where there’s a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Just leave the pain alone for a while, until you feel solid and secure enough in that sense of ease that you can turn around and look at the pain. See, why is it that a pain in the body would have an effect on the mind? It doesn’t have to. What are you doing to bring that pain into your mind? What perception do you have of the pain? What mental label or image is bringing the pain into the mind? Can you drop that perception? Can you drop that image? Or you can dig around into the pain. The Chan Mahapabhu has that technique of trying to find where’s the worst spot in the pain right now. In other words, instead of allowing yourself to be a victim of the pain, you become more proactive. You get aggressive. Instead of letting yourself be attacked by the pain, you take on the role of being the investigator, looking for where the pain is the worst. Or looking for where the pain is the worst, looking for what image of the pain you may have cooked up in your mind and you haven’t found it yet. By being more proactive like this, you suffer a lot less. You’re not in the role of being the pained person. You’re in the role of being the investigator. That puts you on top of things, puts you in a better position. Or, instead of seeing the pain as coming at you, you can perceive it as just going away each time the pain arises. And it arises in these little pulses, each pulse of pain. Notice it going away, going away, going away. It’s as if you’re riding in the back of a car, facing backwards, and as you go down the road, everything is going away from you. That too gets you out of the position of being the victim. So these are some useful things to remember. Where you should be, you should be with the breath. When issues come up, what should you do? You’ve got your tools. The things you’ve read about, the things you’ve heard, the things that you’ve concocted yourself, your own strategies, your own tactics. You don’t have to carry the whole load around in your mind all the time. But try to have them nearby. So that when you need them, you can turn, take a tool, apply it. This is why it’s so important to develop mindfulness as a sense of memory, your ability to hold things in mind, your ability to retrieve them when you need them. Because we are doing something here, we have an activity. If we’re simply a matter of just being, being, being, aware, aware, aware, there’s not much you’d have to remember. But we’re working on the path. We’ve got those four duties from the Four Noble Truths. We’re trying to develop the path so we can abandon the cause of suffering, so we can realize the cessation of suffering. We have to be able to put ourselves in a position where we can actually comprehend the suffering and stress to see what’s going on. That’s why we have to develop strong mindfulness. Mindfulness in strong concentration. Otherwise the mind will run away from the stress. Or at least try to run away. It can’t really run away. It finds itself caught, but it’s running and running and running, but it can’t get away. So you want to put the mind in a position where it can feel confident, feel strong, and turn around and look at the pain and comprehend why these physical and mental pains are putting such a huge burden on the mind. Why are we pulling them in? How can we learn how to let them go? So you need to be both alert and mindful to do this, seeing things as they’re happening and remembering what your duty is here right now and the various ways you can bring that duty to completion. This is what you have to remember.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/120409_Remember_This.mp3>