Why Meditate

May 22, 2012

Close your eyes. Put your hands in your lap. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breath, the process of breathing. It can be in your chest, in your abdomen, at your nose, in your throat—anywhere where there are clear sensations that tell you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” Focus on those sensations. Give them some space. Don’t clamp down on them. Just keep track of them. And notice what rhythm or breathing feels good. If you’re feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that’s energizing. If you’re feeling tense, try breathing in a way that’s more relaxing. Because you do have this ability to affect your breath, and the breath is going to have an effect on how your body feels. And if you want the mind to stay in the present, you want it to be here with a sense of comfort, a sense of well-being, a sense of energy. The question, of course, is why do you want it to be here in the present? Because important things are happening in the mind in the present. We had that chant just now on aging, illness, and death. And a lot of people, when they hear things like that, think, “Buddhism is being pessimistic again. Formidable truths are about suffering.” But they don’t just stop with suffering. The Buddha’s like a doctor. You go to see him and he says, “Well, you have a serious disease, but there is a cure.” Doctors who don’t have the cure don’t want to talk about that serious disease. But the Buddha talks openly about it because he’s got the cure. We suffer from clinging. We cling to the body, we cling to our feelings, our perceptions, our thought constructs, even our consciousness of things around us, things inside us. We hold on to these things and feed on them. And in feeding on them, we suffer. Because these things are subject to aging, illness, and death. If you don’t believe it, go to a hospital, go to an old folks’ home, go to a funeral home, places where the sufferings of the world get concentrated. And you see a lot of people there who are totally lost. They have no skills to deal with aging, no skills to deal with their sickness. The doctors may be able to help them to some extent, but there’s an awful lot that doctors can’t do. You have to depend on yourself so that when aging hits, when illness hits, when death comes, you have the skills you need in order not to suffer. When you’re separated from those you love, you need the skills not to suffer. That’s what that fifth contemplation is about. We’re the owners of our actions. It’s our actions that cause us to suffer because they’re unskillful. But when we learn how to act in a skillful way, speak in a skillful way, think in a skillful way, we don’t have to suffer. This is what the meditation is all about. For us to look at what’s going on in the mind in the present moment, what kind of intentions we have, because it’s the intentions that drive our actions. If the intention is unskillful, the actions are going to be unskillful and lead to suffering. If the intentions are skillful, the action will be skillful and help turn toward the end of suffering. So that’s why we want to look at the present moment, because the present moment is where these intentions are happening. So we set up an intention. This is one of the easiest ways to notice what intentions are bubbling around in the mind. Otherwise we do things and say things, and someone will ask us, “Why did you do that?” And you say, “Well, I thought and such and such,” and then you come up with a reason afterwards. Way too many people are like that. And if you’re not paying careful attention to your intentions, well, who is? It’s like you’ve handed it over to a machine that just kind of churns things out out of habit. So what you want to do is learn how to stay right here to watch those intentions. So we set up the intention to stay with the breath. And you’ll notice that after a while the intention changes. A new intention comes into its place. You decide you want to think about what you’re going to do tomorrow or what you did today. So you have to remind yourself, “No, that’s not what we’re here for.” Come back to the breath. That reminding is what mindfulness does. That’s a quality that’s going to be really important in training the mind, this ability to remember and to remind yourself. Otherwise you can learn a lot of things in the practice, but if you forget them or you can’t call them to mind when you need them, they won’t have any meaning. Another quality you want is alertness, just watching what’s actually happening, what’s arising, what’s passing away. So if one of those new intentions comes in to pull you away, you notice it immediately and come right back to the breath. That coming right back to the breath immediately, that’s part of ardency. Ardency is the desire not to suffer, but to be mindful. So those are the qualities you’re developing as you meditate here on the breath. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Mindfulness deals primarily with the past, what you’ve learned from the past. Alertness deals with the present moment. Ardency deals with the present and aims at a skillful future. All of these to work together as you’re focused on the breath. The breath is here to provide you an anchor point. You know when you’re with the breath, you’re in the present moment. You can’t watch the breath that happened two seconds ago, and you can’t watch the breath that’s going to happen in five seconds until you get there in five seconds. The only breath you can watch is the one that’s happening right now, right now, right now. The breath also provides you something to play with here in the present. It’s not all work. The breath here is related to the energy flow in the body. It’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the energy that flows down the spine, flows down the nerves in your arms and your legs, the nerves all around your head, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. You may want to take a survey of the different parts of the body as you breathe in and breathe out to see if there’s any place where tension builds up or you hold on to tension as you breathe in or breathe out. If you notice that, then say, “Okay, let’s try breathing in and breathing out without allowing any tension to build up at that spot.” If you notice there’s a catch or a kind of a pulling up or a pulling down in the body that doesn’t feel comfortable, again, focus on that spot and say, “Keep that relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath.” See what that does. You’ll find that the sense of energy flow in the body is going to change. As you work through the body this way, you’ll find there’s a greater sense of ease and well-being that spreads around in the body. So you feel more like settling in and enjoying that sense of well-being. It may be a type of attachment, but it’s a healthy one. Because if you’re not attached to healthy things, the mind is going to go out looking for unhealthy things. It’s like people who can’t get good food. They’ll eat just about anything. We notice this sometimes here at the monastery. When the coyotes are really hungry, they’ll eat anything. You look at their scat and you find pieces of plastic rope sometimes. That’s the way the mind is. It’s going to feed on bad things, rotten things, harmful things. So as long as it’s feeding, give it something good. You’ve got the breath coming in, the breath going out. It’s perfectly harmless, perfectly free. You don’t have to buy it from anybody or take it from anybody. It’s coming in, going out, and you have the freedom to see how it’s coming in in a way that’s refreshing, energizing. It’s relaxing, whatever you need right now. This is a resource we have right here that most of us don’t take advantage of. So pay some attention to the breath. Try to explore what its possibilities are. And as you stick with it, you begin to become more sensitive to the mind as well. You see a thought when it comes in, and you see the impact it has on the body. And you see the impact it has on the breath as well. Some thoughts cause a catch in the breath, because you’re reacting with either greed, aversion, delusion, fear, lust. And you can sometimes notice this fact in the way that the mind that particular thought has an impact on the breath. You gain skill in not letting the mind follow after thoughts that are unskillful, that do cause harm. You see them and you can drop them. Because all too often a thought comes in and we just keep chewing on it again and again and again, bringing it back, bringing it back, bringing it back. Looking at it from this side, looking at it from that side, holding onto it, hoping to get some satisfaction out of it. But the Buddha said a lot of these thoughts are like old bones that have been boiled, and there’s nothing left of any kind of flavor to them, and yet we keep chewing on them. As Ajaan Lee says, “All we have is the taste of our own saliva.” We shouldn’t be all that bad. I mean, you don’t get anything out of it, but at least it doesn’t do much harm. But the problem is that most of our thoughts bring suffering with them, especially our thoughts of attachment to the body, our thoughts of attachment to the sensual pleasures of life. Because these are the things that make us afraid of aging, illness, and death. We realize we’re not going to be able to stay in comfort with a body and we’re going to start losing, piece by piece and bit by bit, all the pleasures we used to have. The aging, illness, and death are no fun. But what makes them really bad, though, is all the thoughts that we build up around them. Our thoughts run wild. “I can’t do this anymore,” “I can’t do that anymore,” “This person isn’t coming to see us anymore,” “This person doesn’t show any interest.” All kinds of things come in and they pile up on the mind. Illness comes, and we latch onto the pain. The pain absorbs our awareness, it fills our awareness. Death comes, we’re afraid of dying, we’re afraid we’re going to be wiped out. And a lot of the things that cause suffering in these things comes from thinking run wild. You want to have the confidence that, no, the mind doesn’t die, the body may die, and the functions of the brain may go away. But this basic awareness doesn’t die. It’s actually something separate from the pain. It’s something separate from the body. In the beginning you may not see that directly, but as long as you have confidence that that’s true, that helps you deal with aging, illness, and death a lot better. At the same time, you begin to see all the thoughts that make you suffer as you age. “I can’t do this anymore,” “I can’t do that anymore.” Well, what can you do? Focus on the things you can do. When there’s illness, at the very least, you can stay focused on your breath. You can stay as alert as you can be, as mindful as you can be. Even though there may be pains in some parts of the body, they don’t fill the whole body. Focus on the parts that are comfortable. Make those your resting place. As for any other thoughts that come up that would make you suffer around the aging or suffer around the illness, just let them go. Let them go. You don’t have to get involved with them. No matter how true they may seem, they’re not appropriate for that time. You have to look at a thought to see what’s true, what’s beneficial, and what’s timeline. Learn how to think only the thoughts that are true, beneficial, and timeline. This is a skill we learn as we focus on the breath. Because other thoughts are going to come in right now, and no matter how amazing or wonderful they may be, they’re not timeline. Even if they’re beneficial, they’re not timeline. This is not the time for them. You learn how to say no to them. This is going to be an important skill. As aging and illness come, the same when death comes, the mind of an undrained person goes running wild all over the place. And at the moment of death, if it’s out of control, who knows where it’s going to land for its next life? But if you can keep your attention under control, keep your focus under control, you don’t have to focus on the things that are dying. You focus on what remains, a sense of awareness. And as for the other things in life that you miss—family, friends, the people you’re going to be separated from—you realize this is what life is all about. It’s separation. This is nothing new. You’re not the only one. You have to learn how to develop your own inner resources so you can handle aging, illness, and death when they come and not suffer. That’s the skill we’re learning here as we meditate. It begins with these simple skills of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Because as these get developed, you find that they cut through a lot of unnecessary suffering. And so the Buddha’s message, talking about suffering or aging, illness, and death, is not pessimistic at all. It’s very optimistic. There are skills you can develop so you don’t have to suffer from these things. Most people are free to think of aging, illness, and death. They’re just happy that old people get stuck going away in old folks’ homes, and sick people get stuck away in hospitals, and dead people go to funeral homes where you don’t have to see them. But then when they themselves have to go, they’re totally at a loss. They haven’t developed the skills that are needed. So you don’t have to suffer in these places. But the Buddha teaches us to face these problems square on and to learn the skills that enable us to be free from suffering. Even in the middle of aging, illness, and death, they’re the most important skills you can master.

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