The Wheel of Dhamma

December 28, 2012

Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths to see how it feels, where you feel the breathing process. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Try shorter breathing or more shallow, heavier or lighter. Just stay right here with the breathing, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Be mindful to stay with the breath. In other words, remember to stay with the breath and be alert to see what’s actually happening. And be ardent about this. In other words, if you notice the mind is slipping off, bring it right back. You don’t have to think about anything else right now. If you’re thinking about the breath, that’s fine, but don’t think about anything else. Any other thoughts that do come into the mind, just let them go. When you’re with the breath, try to be alert, very sensitive to how the breathing feels. You might experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels best at this moment. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it until it doesn’t feel so good or you think maybe something might be better. So try changing again. It’s the needs of the body. You’re going to change as you sit here, as the mind settles down. You find that your breathing rate is going to change. That’s perfectly fine. What you’re doing here is developing a quality called concentration, together with mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to remember to stay with the breath. Concentration is where you really stay with it. You stick just with the breath, coming in and going out. You’re not worried about anything else. You’re not thinking about this afternoon or tomorrow or next week or anything, aside from what’s right here, right now. It’ll take a while to get settled in on the breath like this, but don’t get discouraged. Just keep coming back, coming back, coming back, because the breath is always here. It’s always coming in, going out. It’s the present of the body. You simply want to bring the present of your mind, in other words, your attention. Keep it right here with the breath. The more you can stay settled with the breath, the more ease the mind will feel, because it doesn’t have to keep jumping around, thinking about this, that, or the other thing. There’s only one thing it has to think about. It’s right here, right now. This is called developing a path. We’re training the mind so that it can understand the big problem in life, which is the unnecessary stress and suffering it causes itself. Think of the Buddha’s first sermon, which we chanted just now. After his awakening, he thought for a long time about what he was going to teach and who he was going to teach. Finally, he went back to a group of mendicants called the Five Brethren. Then he started out by talking about different paths of practice. The idea being that the way you live, the way you think, the way you act and speak, is going to have an impact on how you live. It’s going to have an impact on how much you’re going to suffer, how much you’re not going to suffer. Your actions really do make a difference. That’s the message of the beginning of the talk. He says, “If you just indulge in sensual pleasures, that’s going to lead to suffering. It may be pleasant for a while, but down the line there’s going to be trouble. Or if you try to torment yourself, hoping that somehow by making yourself suffer a lot of pain it’s going to purify the mind, that’s not going to work either. It just ends up creating a lot more suffering.” So the path he taught was something called a middle path. It doesn’t mean it’s halfway between pleasure and pain. It means it simply avoids those two extremes and looks at developing qualities of the mind, particularly virtue, concentration, and discernment. That’s the path. So that you can overcome this problem of the unnecessary stress and suffering the mind causes itself. That talk was called the Wheel of Dhamma because there’s a part where the Buddha goes through four important truths. The first truth is that there really is stress and suffering in life. The second is that it’s caused by our craving and ignorance. Notice that. The cause of your suffering isn’t outside, it’s inside. It’s the way the mind craves for things that cannot be. Or they can be, but they’re going to cause suffering down the line. And just the fact that it’s hungry is suffering in and of itself. However, he said it is possible to put an end to that cause of suffering, which means you can put an end to suffering. And the way you do it is through practicing the path. So those are four truths. There’s what’s called dukkha and pali, which means stress or suffering. Then there’s the cause and there’s the fact that that cause can be ended, leading to the end of suffering. And then there’s a path that actually does that. Now, for each of those four truths, there’s three kinds of knowledge. One is simply knowing that this truth actually does exist. It really is true that there is stress and suffering in life. And as the Buddha analyzed it, it comes down to clinging to five different kinds of activities. One is just simply holding on to the body. That’s being you or yours. Now there are feelings, feelings of pleasure and pain. You hold on to those, think that those are yours, that you can control them. Then there are perceptions, labels the mind puts on things. When you see a light, something in the mind says, “Light.” That’s a label. You see a ceiling, you see a moon, the mind says, “Ceiling, moon.” Those are labels the mind puts on things. Then there’s what’s called fabrication. These are the thoughts you put together about things. And finally there’s consciousness, your awareness of all these things. When you latch on to these things and cling to them, that’s where the suffering is. That’s the first level of knowledge about suffering. You just know that it really is true that there is suffering and stress in your life. Secondly, there’s the truth of the cause of suffering. You know that that’s true. You know that there is an end to suffering. That’s true and that there is a path that you can practice, things you can do to bring an end to suffering. That’s the first level of knowledge for each of those, is you know that these things are true. Then the second level is you know that there’s a duty with regard to each of these truths. You want to comprehend suffering. Now notice we don’t usually comprehend suffering. We tend to run away from it or push it away. We don’t like it. We want to put an end to it right away. But we don’t really put an end to it in the right way. It’s like having a disease. You can cure the disease by taking the medicine. But sometimes we don’t even bother taking the medicine. You just want to push the disease away. That’s not going to solve anything at all. What you want to do is comprehend it. Exactly what are the symptoms of this disease? So you can know what medicine you want to use. So you want to comprehend the suffering. And when you see what’s causing it, you want to abandon the cause. Just like if you’re hitting yourself over the head and you realize, okay, you’re suffering pain because you’re hitting yourself over the head, you stop hitting yourself over the head and that makes the pain go away. That’s for the cessation of something. That’s something you want to realize directly. That’s the duty with regard to that. And finally, the path is something you have to develop. You have to develop virtue. You have to develop concentration, like we’re doing right now. And you have to develop your discernment. And those three qualities are not radically different. In other words, as you practice virtue, you resolve not to harm other people, you resolve not to harm yourself with your words and your deeds. And as you do that, you develop mindfulness, as you keep those precepts in mind, and alertness to watch your activities. And then there’s the discernment that helps you see. It helps you figure out how you can stick with these precepts, even when you want to do something else or when it’s easy to do something else against the precepts. So you develop some concentration and discernment in the precepts right there. As you’re doing concentration, you develop discernment, too, because you’ve got to figure out what kind of breath is going to be good right now. Where in the body do I focus so I can keep my focus solid? That requires some discernment. You have to understand cause and effect. So these are things you want to develop. That’s the second level of knowledge for the truths. Not only are these things true, but they’re something you want to do with them. It’s not enough just to hear that there are four noble truths. You realize that they give you what’s called an imperative, something that makes you want to do something. You want to put an end to suffering. So you try to comprehend it. You try to abandon the cause so you can see the end of suffering. You do that by developing the path. The third level of knowledge is when you actually have completed those duties. That’s what happens at awakening. In fact, the Buddha said that’s how he knew that he was fully awakened when he had completed his duties with regard to all of those things. That’s three levels of knowledge–knowing the truth, knowing the duty, and knowing that the duty is completed. So there’s that section where the Buddha goes through each of the four truths. He lists the three knowledges appropriate to that truth. Back in his day, when you did something like that, when you made long lists like this, you put two different variables or three or four variables against each other and listed them out. That’s called a wheel. This is why his teaching is called the Wheel of Dhamma. Then the symbol of the wheel is that it’s complete. It’s a circle. It covers everything, all around. So the Buddha said this is the big problem in life. But he offers a solution. Sometimes people say Buddhism is pessimistic because it talks so much about suffering. But that’s like saying a doctor is pessimistic when you go to his office and he asks you what’s wrong. The reason you’re there is because something is wrong. He admits that. He acknowledges that. And the reason he’s willing to talk about your disease is because he should have a cure. It’s the same with the Buddha. He saw that there really was a cure. A cure to all the suffering that we create for ourselves through our unskillful thoughts, unskillful words, unskillful deeds. He says there’s a cure. You can change the way you act, you can change the way you speak, you can change the way you think, by training your mind. So he’s not afraid to talk about suffering, because there’s a cure. And once you’ve solved this problem in life, all this unnecessary stress and suffering, nothing else can weigh down the mind. There may be pains in the body, there may be disappointments outside, but if the mind is well-trained, it doesn’t make itself suffer over these things. It sees that this is just a natural part of human life. It has a different source for its happiness. It has a source inside. It doesn’t change even as the body gets old, as it gets sick, even when the body dies. The source for happiness inside the mind doesn’t get touched, doesn’t change. So that’s what we’re working toward as we meditate, is to realize that truth that there is an awareness that’s totally free from suffering, regardless of what happens otherwise. This is why we’re developing this path. So we’ve learned about the truths, we’ve learned about the duties appropriate to the truth, and now we’re working on that third level, trying to master each of those duties. Each of them is a skill. It takes time, it takes effort, but it’s time and effort that’s well spent. So you’ve got this opportunity, a whole hour, to do nothing but train your mind. Stick with the breath. Notice where you’re letting the breath be uncomfortable in ways that it doesn’t have to. And already you’re beginning to see that there are parts of your experience that you can change. So you don’t have to be worried weighed down by even little bits of stress. The mind settles down in concentration, there’s a great sense of well-being. You feel solid, stable, secure. You don’t feel threatened by anything. And even though that’s not the end of the path, it shows you that what the Buddha said was right. By training your mind, you can eliminate a lot of the suffering in your life. Instead of trying to straighten things out outside, you straighten things out inside your mind. And you start with these simple steps, focusing on the breath, being mindful to stay with the breath, being alert to notice what’s going on with the breath, making whatever changes you need in where you’re focused, how you breathe. So you have a sense of ease sitting here, and you can maintain that sense of ease throughout the hour. When you do that, you’re on the path. And it’s a good place to be.

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