What They Don’t Teach in School

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Close your eyes so you can pay attention to your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change the rhythm of the breath. Make it shorter or longer or in-short and out-long or in-long and out-short. Deeper or more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to get a sense of what kind of breathing is going to feel good for the body right now, because the breath, after all, is the energy of life. And it stands to reason that if this energy feels comfortable, it’s going to be good for the body, it’s going to be good for the mind. So study your breath for a while. This is one of those things they don’t have you study in school. The big issue in life is how to stop causing yourself stress and suffering. It’s something that doesn’t get taught. You look at the values of our society, the values that people are trained in. We’ve turned a lot of our education over to the media. Yet can those sources be trusted? They like you to be greedy. They like you to be angry. They like you to be deluded. Is it good for you? No. So that’s something you have to decide for yourself. Is this something you want to learn? If you really care for yourself, if you care for your happiness, you realize this is the most important skill you need to develop. How to look at your actions and see when they’re causing stress, that’s unnecessary. And how you can stop. So one of the first things you need to do is to train your mind to be a reliable observer, so you can watch your actions and know exactly what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, and what the results are. That’s one of the reasons why we meditate, is to train the mind to be more observant, to be a more reliable observer. Try to get the mind as still as possible, so that it’s not running around all the time. When it’s still, it can see more clearly. You develop sensitivity in the present moment. So think of that as studying the present moment. You’re completing your education by learning a skill that’s really good for you. So if you notice that your mind is slipping off the breath, just bring it right back. Be very matter-of-fact about it. Don’t get upset that the mind is wandering off. Just notice the fact that the mind is not quite as under your control as you may have thought it was. So you’ve got to learn how to exert a little bit more control over it here. Of course, we know what happens to control freaks. They take a situation and make it worse. So you’ve got to exert intelligent, observant control. In other words, see what the mind likes in the present moment. What kind of breathing will it like right now? What part of the body do you like to be focused on? You have the choice. Explore your present awareness, and try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing is going and what impact it’s having on the body. It’s easy to observe. It’s a huge area to explore right here. And as you learn how to stay more and more settled here over time, that’s when you become a more reliable observer. You can see how the breath shapes your sense of the body and how that feeling of either well-being or not well-being in the body can affect the mind. Then you should get more and more adept at developing a sense of well-being that you can depend on. Just taking a couple of good, deep breaths or whatever kind of breathing the body needs at any point. You’ll find both the body gets refreshed and the mind has a sense of refreshment as well. When the mind feels refreshed, it’s in a much better position to observe things. In particular, to observe something that’s really important is when it’s made a mistake, when it’s acted on an intention that you know is not skillful. You went ahead and did it anyhow. The more quickly you can admit that, the more quickly you can drop the unskillful action. There are so many things we learn in life, but one thing we tend to overlook is how to learn from your mistakes. That’s a really important skill. Because a lot of people out there will tell you all the wrong things. When you do something right, they’ll say it’s wrong. When you do something wrong, they’ll say it’s right. You have to be able to judge for yourself. Do they know what they’re saying? And you have to have the maturity to admit to yourself that, “Yes, that was a mistake. I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t have done that.” As the Buddha said to his son, when you realize that you made a mistake like that, you go talk it over with someone who you trust. So you can learn from that person how not to repeat that mistake. And then you resolve that you’re not going to repeat it. The next time around you’ll have a better idea of what to do or what to say or what to think. Over time, you get better and better at anticipating the results of your actions. So even before you say something or do something or think something, you have a sense of where it’s going to go. And if you realize it’s going to cause harm to yourself or harm to other people, you just don’t do it. While you’re doing it, you watch what the results are. If it turns out there’s some unexpected harm, well, then you stop. Then you look at the long-term results of the action after it’s done. If you saw that you did cause harm, again, you talk it over with somebody. If you don’t see that there was any harm, then you take joy in the fact that you’re developing your skill. These are very basic instructions, and yet they’re missing in so many people’s education. Years back I was teaching a course. In the passage where the Buddha is teaching his son, these lessons were brought up. There was a psychotherapist in the course, and so she took these instructions and put them through a copier and handed them out to a group of people she was treating. It was a mindfulness-based therapy group. So they read through the Buddha’s instructions to his son, and then she asked them, “What do you think of the Buddha as a father?” And everyone in the group said, “If our parents had taught us like this, we wouldn’t need these mindfulness-based therapy groups.” So this is a very important part of your education. Learning how to observe your actions in a fair and unbiased way. Learning how to learn from your mistakes. So you don’t have to keep on repeating them. In particular, the mistakes where you’re either harming yourself or harming other people, you begin to realize that that harm is unnecessary. And you learn new ways to act. Because one of the big ironies of human life is that we all want happiness, and yet through our actions we can cause an awful lot of suffering. This point was so important that the Buddha made it the centerpiece of his teachings. In fact, there is suffering in life, and it comes from the mind. The kind of suffering that really weighs the mind down comes from your own actions, the ways you think. So he taught a path, part of which we’re following right now, getting the mind concentrated so you can see, observe your actions, and learn to notice exactly what it was in your intention that was causing the trouble, where the intention went wrong. So you know enough not to follow through with those intentions. Because that’s the good news of the Buddha’s teachings, that you don’t have to cause yourself any stress or suffering or pain. You can train the mind. And you discover that the mind is in a state of suffering. Sometimes we think that we suffer because of what someone else did or someone else said, but it’s what we do with that person’s actions or we do with that person’s words. We bring them into the mind and we burn ourselves with them. That’s why the mind suffers. If the mind didn’t do that, we could live in the world and regardless of what was happening, the mind wouldn’t have to suffer, because you wouldn’t be dragging things in to weigh yourself down. That mountain over there on the horizon, the founder of the monastery one time asked, “Is that mountain heavy?” Of course, everyone asks a question like this. You don’t give a dumb answer. So he gave the answer himself. He said, “Look, if you try to pick up the mountain, it’s going to be heavy on you. But if you don’t try to pick it up, then it doesn’t really matter whether the mountain is heavy in and of itself.” In the same way, there are a lot of issues in the world that we use to weigh ourselves down because we try to pick them up, hold on to them. But you don’t have to carry them around. You can put them down. You know they’re there and you can deal with them, but you don’t have to use them to weigh the mind down. That’s the skill we’re trying to work on here, how to live with the world, live in the world, but not be weighed down by the world. That’s a really important part of your education. And it’s a part that gets left out in our society. So it’s part of our self-education when you decide that you’ve had enough of this self-imposed suffering, this self-imposed stress. And you want to do something about it. That’s what the teachings are for. It’s one of the reasons why Buddhists don’t go out proselytizing all the time. Because the teachings are there for people who realize that this is what the problem is and they want to learn how to train themselves to solve the problem. So it’s up to each of us to decide how much more suffering do you want? At what point do you have enough? When you learn to stop blaming the world out there and focus instead on training yourself and training your own thoughts and words and deeds so that they are skillful and you don’t have to weigh yourself down anymore. That’s the point when your education is complete.

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