To Depend on Yourself

April 3, 2013

Keep watch over your breath. Keep watch over your mind. Try to stay right here with how the breathing feels. When you breathe in, where do you notice the sensation of the breath? When you breathe out, where do you notice it? Where is it clearest right now? Focus your attention right there and see what happens to the breath as you stay up with it. Sometimes it’ll grow more subtle, sometimes it’ll stop for a bit and then start up again. Just watch it. If there’s any place where the breath is uncomfortable, then you can make some changes. Once you’ve made the change, watch it again to see if the change had a good effect. How do you know if it had a good effect? Well, you have to start learning how to read the breath for yourself. You have to learn how to depend on yourself to be a good judge of what’s working and what’s not working. And that takes time. You have to be observant so you can begin to connect. Where are the causes? Where are the effects? What causes come out of the mind and have an effect on the breath? What causes come out of the breath and have an effect on the mind? You want to watch these things and learn how to make changes. Make yourself a more and more reliable judge. There are so many things in life where we can depend on other people, but this is an area where we have to learn how to depend on ourselves. In fact, we’ve got this body here that’s subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. It’s going to do all kinds of things we don’t like. Then there are doctors. Then there’s medicine. But they can help only so much. You find that when you’re sick, you have to depend on yourself for a lot of things, not the least of which is keeping your mind from suffering from the sickness. And that’s just ordinary sickness. With aging, things get worse. With death, they get a lot worse. And yet you have to depend on yourself even in those cases, especially in those cases. When death has come, that means the doctors are no longer able to help you. You’re on your own. So you want to train the mind so that it’s up for the challenge. This is one of the reasons why there’s so much work around here. To remind you that meditation is not just chilling out. There’s work to be done. Sometimes there are things you don’t want to do, but you have to be willing to do them. Because they’re skills that have to be mastered. And some of them are mastered with ease and pleasure, and others are going to require some difficulty. Some are going to take time. Some lessons you think you learned and then you discovered, well, you didn’t learn them thoroughly enough. You’ve got to go back and learn them all over again. So you have to keep reminding yourself. If you don’t learn the little things, you’re going to learn the lessons. No one’s going to learn them for you. And if you don’t learn them now, when are you going to learn them? These lessons don’t get easier with time. So if you find the mind slipping off the breath, just bring it right back. Bring it right back. Until you wake up early in the morning and don’t feel like meditating, you’ve got to remind yourself. If you don’t meditate now, when are you going to meditate? You don’t know how much time you’ve got left. Figure out what will motivate you. Learn how to psych yourself out. Because this really is an important skill. It is the skill you have to master, keeping your mind under control. Because if the mind is not under control, it’ll thrash around and create all kinds of suffering. I keep talking with people whose parents have never meditated and say, “How do you deal with them as they’re dying and they’re just all over the place?” Well, you do what you can to help to make sure they’re not worried about things. Because wherever they’re worried, that’s where their minds will go. You remind them of the good that they’ve done. But you can never really know how much that’s going to help. Sometimes they’ll forget your words. If they haven’t been meditating, they don’t have much control over their thoughts and control over their minds. And you know that someday you’re going to be there. That’s when you really appreciate the fact that you did get up and do the extra work that’s needed when you meditate to learn those lessons. How to depend on yourself, how to keep yourself happily here in the present moment, how to take advantage of what comforts the body does offer, how you can get the mind to look at itself directly, the sense of awareness in and of itself. So that when the body is no longer inhabitable, you don’t feel lost. You know this spot really well. You’ve been here time and time and time again. It’s like going through a house, going through the old house where some of the floorboards are rotten. You know where to step and where not to step. Not because you’ve stepped on the wrong spots. But after all, you really know the house and you can go through it without any problem. It’s the same here with the present moment. There’s a lot of potential in the present moment for a lot of suffering, things you could think about, things you could drag up from the past, worries about the future. You could sit here and make yourself miserable. There was a woman who came one time with a friend. The friend had been meditating here a couple times and really liked it and wanted to share the experience with her friend. So the new one came and sat and meditated. And at the end of the hour she said she’d never suffered so much in her life. And just sitting there was out under the trees, a nice breeze. Everything was quiet and peaceful. And she managed to make herself suffer more than she’d ever suffered before. So there is that potential here. There’s also the potential for creating a lot of pleasure. And it’s all up to your skills, the skills with which you focus on things, the skills with which you talk to yourself about things, the ideas you hold in mind about the breath, and what’s a good use of your time. When you notice there’s a potential for pleasure here in the body, how do you maintain that potential? How do you allow it to grow? How do you stay with the causes for the pleasure so that you don’t just wallow around in it like in a feather bed and then find it dissolves away? You’ve got to stay with the breath. Because the act of staying focused on the breath, the act of being attentive and alert to the breath, that’s what keeps the pleasure going. So how do you allow the pleasure to be there at the same time you’re not trying to wallow in it? Let it do its work. You keep working at the causes, the pleasure will take care of itself. We learn how to make distinctions like this in the present moment. That’s how discernment develops in your meditation. You gain mastery over cause and effect. That’s what the discernment is all about. It’s not like we’re trying to sit here and say, “Oh yes, things are impermanent, stressful, not self.” We say, “Okay, we succeeded in that one. Check that.” That’s not what those teachings are about. They’re meant to be used so you can understand, “Well, where are the causes for stress?” Or when there’s pleasure, is the pleasure really as solid as you think it is? Could you make it more solid? Do you see any ups and downs in the pleasure? If there are ups and downs, there’s stress. There’s something you did. You learned how to use the breath here to start observing your own mind. In other words, you learned how to use the potentials you’ve got here. You learned how to depend on yourself so that no matter what happens, you’re ready. Because there are things about life that are going to be pleasant, and there are things that are going to be under your control, things that you can manage, and there’s a lot of stuff that’s not going to be under your control. If you learn how to make the distinctions, you can stay with the areas that are under your control. Keep them going well. Keep the state of your mind going well, even though the body may be doing all kinds of strange things, cutting you off from the people you’ve loved. You can’t talk to them, you can hardly hear them. Whatever stories you had going together, whatever relationships you had, they all get frazzled at the end. It’s very rare that people actually attain closure of any kind. Things just kind of stop and unravel. But if the mind is really well-trained, it’s able to live with that. Because it stays with things that it can control. Where are you focused? What’s the quality of your focus? Learning how to make distinctions between things that change and things that don’t change, things that are stressful and things that are not stressful. It’s through staying here in the present moment and experimenting with the breath, experimenting with the mind, that you learn how to make these distinctions. These distinctions are the things that are going to enable you to not suffer when there’s aging, not suffer when there’s illness, not suffer when there’s death. Because you’ve separated things out, what dies and what doesn’t die. This is something you have to do for yourself, a skill you have to master for yourself. And you realize that if you really love yourself and love the people around you, you’re going to be doing what you can so you’re not thrashing around when things get difficult. Because you’ve got all the skills you need.

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