The Path Changes Your Mind

May 7, 2013

Try to be on good terms with your breath. Watch it for a while to see what feels good, what doesn’t feel good, what kind of breathing feels best. The more attention you pay to it, the more you’ll learn, the more skillful you’ll be able to be in using the breath as an anchor, a place where the mind can settle down. Gather together here in the present moment. But this practice of concentration is more than just giving the mind a place to rest. It’s part of a path. As in that chant we did just now, the Eightfold Path, the definitions sound fairly abstract. But there’s another passage where the Buddha talks about how the different factors work together, and they really are important for taking concentration beyond just a place to rest or a place to relax. It’s a basis for looking deeper into your mind and understanding where it is that you’re adding unnecessary stress and suffering. Not only while you’re sitting here quietly, but as you go through the day, it gives you a good foundation for seeing these things. If you keep that issue in mind, that’s what Right View is all about. In that other explanation, the Buddha talks about right concentration as being the heart of the path, and all the other factors as being aids to that, to move it beyond just simply right concentration to noble right concentration, in other words, something that has an ennobling effect on the mind, an ennobling effect on your words and deeds. The Buddha basically says there are three factors that come first. There’s Right View, which recognizes that the big issue of suffering in life is something that comes from within, and the solution comes from developing good qualities in the mind. So you learn to recognize what are the good qualities and which ones are not so good. So with each of the factors of the path, Right View, you have the duty of recognizing what’s Right View, what’s Wrong View, what’s Right Resolve, what’s Wrong Resolve, and so on down the line. And then there’s Right Mindfulness, which hovers around each of the factors as well. Unlike what we’ve heard from the media, mindfulness is not simply being aware with equanimity. It actually means keeping something in mind. In this case, you’re trying to keep in mind the fact that if something is a Right View or an instance of Right Resolve or any of the Right Factors, that’s something you want to develop. If any instances of Wrong Views or Wrong Resolve come up, those are things you want to get rid of. That’s the duty of Right Mindfulness, is to remember that. Because it is so easy when you’re sitting here, the mind starts getting quiet, you lose all your bearings, all your connections to anything else. So mindfulness is there to keep you alert, to remind you that there are things you’ve got to watch out for. And then there’s Right Effort. Right Effort is actually what does the developing of the good factors and the abandoning of the wrong factors. So you can see this as you’re working here. You’re trying to stay with the breath. Your Right View tells you, “Okay, you’ve got to stay here. Any thoughts that come in tell you you’ve got to go someplace else. You’ve got to do other things.” You recognize those as wrong. You recognize the wrong views right now. So you keep that distinction in mind. You can’t simply let the mind wander around. If it’s wandering off, you’ve got to bring it back. Because the mind wandering around doesn’t really change, because it’s what it’s been doing for who knows how long. It’s when you learn how to curb it, when you learn how to put a fence around it and stick with that, that’s when the mind is going to change. If you keep the mind focused on something that’s really harmful, it will change for the worse. But here we’re focusing it on something that’s really healing and stabilizing. So the more you can focus it here, the more that healing and stabilizing power will have an effect on the mind. You want to keep that in mind. Don’t allow yourself to forget it. It’s so easy to sit here and suddenly find yourself back home thinking about projects there. Or off someplace you’d like to go. Who knows where the mind will go. You’ve got to remind yourself, “No, that’s not where we want to go.” You’ve got to keep bringing it back. And as for any qualities that will help you stay here, you actually work at developing. That’s what the right effort is all about. And as for letting go, there are two types of letting go. There are some ways of letting go that simply look at something and see that, “Well, this is not where I want to be,” and you can let it go. That’s it. Other things require more of an effort. The Buddha talks in terms of fabrication here. He says, “You’ve got to exert a fabrication.” And when we’re doing concentration practice, the fabrications that are relevant are bodily fabrication, the breath, verbal fabrication, which is the thoughts you have about a topic, and then there’s mental fabrication, the perceptions and feelings you have around something. Verbal and mental fabrications sound very similar, but verbal ones have to do more with the story you’re telling yourself about the issue. And the mental fabrications are a little bit deeper. Underlying perceptions, images you may have of yourself or of the situation around you. So if you find that there’s a thought that’s pulling you away consistently, and simply looking at it will not be enough to drop it, start looking at what you’re thinking in terms of how you’re breathing, what’s the story you’re telling yourself, and what are the underlying perceptions and feelings that keep you hooked on that particular kind of feeling. I was reading some meditation instructions that appeared in a magazine recently. It was all about dealing with emotions. They said, “Well, you’ve got to put aside the story so you can see the feeling. And then the feeling may go away or may not go away, but at least you’re getting away from the story. What kind of leaves you there?” You say, “Well, so what? It’s going to come back again.” Where is this feeling coming from? What is the underlying perception? This woman’s talking about how in a particular issue she was dealing with someone who was very frustrating. She told herself all kinds of stories about how frustrated she was, so she allowed herself to sit still for a while and allow the stories to fall away. Then she saw herself, she had a perception of herself as a small child, helpless. So she sat there with that for a bit and didn’t talk about any resolution. But that was the insight that she gained, that the story adds a lot of unnecessary stuff on top. And if you put the story away, then you see there’s an underlying perception and an underlying feeling. That’s only a halfway job of dealing with this. Because you’ve got to realize that that underlying perception, underlying feeling, that’s pretty arbitrary, too. It’s not your true feeling about something. It’s simply a habit. And the way you’re breathing right now is also contributing to what you’re doing. That’s something you can change. In fact, all these things can be changed. The purpose of meditation is not to get to your true feelings. It’s to realize that some feelings are pretty tenacious and very habitual, but they’re fabricated. The mind puts them together. Anger, say, changes the way you breathe. It sets fire to a lot of stories. You can keep going on anger. The Buddha talks about people being absorbed in anger. Instead of being absorbed in the breath, you can get absorbed in anger. That’s not where you want to be. So you remember that. And then you remember also the Buddha’s tools for taking apart these emotions. The breath is a really good tool to have in this. Because if anger is the issue, you realize anger has hijacked your breath. So you want to take it back. Breathe calmly. And then look at the story you’re telling yourself and ask yourself, “How much do I really believe this story? What if the opposite is true?” How much of the truth is this story telling you? If you’re really angry at somebody, is that person totally bad? If they’re totally bad, you’ve got to feel sorry for them. But usually you find out that there’s some good side to that other person as well. You start putting that into the story, too. It’s a lot less easy to be feeling justified anger about these horrible people. And again, if they really are horrible, they’re creating a lot of bad karma for themselves. So you’ve got to feel sorry for them. And as for that underlying perception, when you suddenly see yourself as a helpless child or victimized in one way or another, you can remind yourself you’re not that helpless child anymore. You’re an adult. You have your ways of dealing with things. And even if people are really, really difficult and it’s hard to think of a way, you can say, “Okay, I’ll just remind myself that what they’re doing is what they’re doing. And it’ll pull me into misery only if I play along. Why am I playing along?” So these are cases where you don’t just sit there and let an unskillful mind state stay there. You’ve really got to work through it. Some people ask, “When you’re doing work like this, how strong does your concentration have to be?” And the answer is, you take whatever concentration you’ve got. If you’re going to deal with distraction like this, you’ve got to do your best against it. Because you’re not just sitting there letting things come and letting them go on their own. Mindfulness actually tries to remind you to encourage skillful states and to let go of unskillful ones. It reminds you that this is important. It reminds you of whatever techniques you’ve mastered in the past or tried in the past that worked. It also reminds you of the ones that didn’t work. It’s in this way that the various elements of the path come together and are very relevant right here. So remember these factors because they take the practice beyond simple relaxation and move it into the area where you’re really doing some important work on the mind. You’re developing new habits, changing your attitudes, making yourself less a victim of things and more proactive. When the Buddha talks about endurance, it’s interesting that there are two things he says that you’ve got to practice endurance with. One is just physical pain, and the second one is unkind and hurtful words. You’ve got to learn how to put up with these because this is what we have in the world. When you have a human body, there’s going to be pain. When you live with people, there are going to be people saying things that you don’t want to hear. And you have to learn how to endure. If you simply can’t stand them, you get into useless arguments. And sometimes the person saying something that you don’t like to hear is actually telling you something you need to know. But when the Buddha talks about unskillful mind states coming to the mind, he does not talk about just sitting there and enduring them. He says you do what you can to uproot them. You do what you can to get rid of them. And having the breath on your side and having the knowledge of these different factors of the path that remind you. There’s verbal fabrication, the stories you tell, there’s mental fabrication, the perceptions and feelings you’ve got. These are things you can change because they’re fabricated. You fabricate new ones to take their place, to make it easier to come back to the breath, so you can get even more established. Your concentration can put down roots, so you’re not easily blown over by whatever winds come from gain or loss or status or loss of status or criticism or praise, pleasure or pain. It’s like a well-rooted tree. And it can grow if you really look after it and are sure to get rid of all the bugs and other things that would destroy the tree. Give it fertilizer, give it water. And then you can enjoy its fruits, enjoy its shade, all the other good things that the tree has to offer.

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