The Skill of Not Suffering

July 6, 2013

We’re going to be sitting here for an hour, so try to find a posture where you can sit with your back straight. That way you can focus your attention on the mind instead of worrying about pains in the body. There will be some pain if you’re not used to the meditation posture. But a good posture helps to relieve some of those difficulties. But even though we’re going to be training the mind, we do that by focusing on the breath. It’s hard to focus straight on the mind right away. You don’t know what you’d focus on. So we focus the mind by giving it a single object. It’s like taking the sun. You focus on the sun’s rays, using a magnifying glass, and getting all the rays to focus on one focal point. That way you get to know the power of the sun. That’s the same with the mind. If you can keep it focused on the breath, you’ll get to know it a lot better because everything will be right here. The breath is in the present moment. When you’re focused on the breath, everything in the mind is focused on the present moment. You’re not wandering through, but you don’t have to pay them any attention. If you go chasing down all the thoughts and trying to straighten them out and put them in a row, you spend a whole hour without being able to look at the breath at all. So think of these thoughts as people coming in and out of a room while you’re doing some work. You’ve got to keep your attention focused on the work. Fortunately, it’s pleasant work. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. That sensation of the breathing is what we’re going to be focusing on. They call that breath energy. The rise of the chest, the rise of the shoulders, the rise of the abdomen as the breath comes in. It’s a movement of energy in the body. And as you engage in deep breathing, you can ask yourself, “Does this feel comfortable?” If it doesn’t, you can change. You can make the breath shorter. You can make it more shallow. Or deeper still, longer still. Heavier, lighter, faster, slower. There are lots of ways you can adjust the breath so that it feels good and feels nourishing to the chest, the abdomen, all the different areas where you can feel the sensation of the breathing energy move. And if after a while that particular wave of breathing doesn’t feel so good anymore, you can change. Try to stay on top of what the body needs right now. That way you keep the mind engaged in the breathing process. If you get bored, you’re going to start looking for other places to go, other things to think about. The mind won’t get trained. As we keep the mind focused here, there are a couple of qualities that we’re developing. One is mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, we’re keeping the breath in mind. And keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay here. Then there’s alertness, watching what’s actually going on, noticing when the mind is with the breath and when the mind is not with the breath. And when you’re with the breath, you’re noticing how it feels. And finally, there’s the quality of ardency, where you really want to do it well. We are working on a skill here. That means if you notice the mind is away from the breath, you drop whatever you’re thinking about and you’ll be right back at the breath. When you’re with the breath, you want to ask yourself, “Is this as comfortable as it could be? Is the mind staying here solidly, or are there any adjustments that have to be made?” As you work with all three of these qualities together—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—they help to get you more absorbed in the breath. It helps the mind to settle down. When the mind settles down in the present, that’s when you can see it clearly. And the big issue we’re going to be looking into is, what is the mind doing right now that’s adding unnecessary stress and suffering to what you’re experiencing? Now, it takes a while to get the mind still enough so you can see this clearly, but it’s good to know in advance. This is where we’re going. Because it is possible for the mind, if it’s not trained to make itself suffer over anything—things go well in life and you can still suffer. If things don’t go so well, you suffer even more. When the mind is trained, though, it doesn’t have to suffer regardless of what’s happening outside. You might say, “Well, I’m not really suffering,” but then there’s always some stress in the way we engage in the world. And a lot of that is unnecessary. In fact, the stress and suffering that weigh down the mind are totally unnecessary. Now, this doesn’t mean that people outside aren’t doing very unskillful things that can be harmful or, at the very least, displeasing or seem unfair. But that’s not the issue. The issue is, why do you have to suffer over things? In the Buddhist analysis, it’s because we’re trying to feed on things. In other words, we’re trying to find our pleasure based on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, our relationships, our jobs, all of our activities out there, generally for the purpose of finding happiness. We want to feed off these things, get some sense of nourishment, for the mind. The mind is like a child crawling around a room, finding whatever there is and sticking it in his mouth, regardless of whether it’s edible or not, or actually good for him. So we have this habit of gobbling down things we like, and it turns out there are a lot of things we don’t like mixed in, so we end up suffering. The purpose of the meditation is to train the mind to find a sense of well-being in the inside, so you’re less hungry for things outside. This sense of well-being has many levels. Just on the very first level of concentration, when you can let go of your daily concerns, your daily burdens, the mind feels a lot lighter. Even though the issues outside may still be there, you tell yourself, “Time out.” The mind doesn’t have to carry these things around all the time, even if you can’t let go of them totally. For the time being, say, “Okay, I don’t need these things, and they don’t need my attention. I can just stay right here.” And as the mind stays, there’s a sense of healing that comes. It’s not wounding itself with all of its outside responsibilities. As the mind gathers in with the breath, the breath gets more comfortable and the mind gets more at ease with the breath. It’s good for both body and mind. This is one of the beginning levels of well-being that come with the meditation. There are times when you begin to leave meditation and you see the mind picking up something. “I thought about this, I thought about that,” and all of a sudden there’s a level of stress, dis-ease, pain even. You can ask yourself, “Okay, why am I pained by this?” And the mind will have lots of reasons. It’s because this is happening to somebody you love, or this is happening to you, or whatever the reason. You can ask yourself, “Well, can’t I just know about these things without having to make myself suffer over them?” That’s the skill that we can develop as meditators. It takes a while. It’s not going to happen instantaneously. But sometimes, you pick up things that you don’t have to pick up at all. You think there’s going to be pleasure in them, but then you find that there’s pain. That’s when you can ask yourself, “Why bother?” When you can find a sense of well-being inside simply by staying with the breath. So it gives you something to compare. A lot of things we do for the sake of happiness are totally unnecessary and end up creating more harm than actual well-being. So it’s about teaching the mind, training the mind, to settle down. No ways of giving you an alternative. It’s one of the first advantages that come from learning how to meditate. It’s like having a home. When the weather gets bad outside, you can go into your home. And your house has windows so you can see what’s going on outside, but you don’t have to be caught in the wind or the rain or the heat or whatever. In other words, you’re not in denial. It’s simply that you’re placing your happiness on a different foundation. Because it is possible to run away from things outside for a while out of denial, but it doesn’t last forever. You have to know about them, you have to deal with them. But one of the real skills is learning how to deal with the issues of the world, not having to suffer over them. Because that’s not where you’re looking for happiness. You’re looking for happiness inside instead. It’s as if your home here inside has all the food you need, a nice place to rest. So you ask yourself, “Why go scavenging outside?” For most of us, though, this spot here inside is not a comfortable one. And one of the main reasons is because we’re not really familiar with how we can use the breath to breathe through a lot of the patterns of tension that come up, either from physical causes or from mental causes. As you get more sensitive to the breath, you begin to realize that when greed, aversion, or delusion come through the mind, they also create patterns of tension in the body. And simply to hold onto a thought, you need to have some little pattern of tension in the body to act as a marker. If you’re thinking about a lot of things, that means there’s a lot of tension in the body. So when you try to stay here in the present moment, you’ll meet up with a lot of tension. So as we breathe, we learn to breathe through those patterns of tension and let them release. As you breathe in, think of the breath energy flowing in and out, not only through the lungs, but also all your nervous system, every muscle in the body, even down to the little tiny muscles in the blood vessels, from the center of the body out to the pores of the skin. Think of a refreshing energy flowing through and releasing whatever patterns of tension you may notice, starting from the really obvious ones, and then when they’re cleared up, then there are more subtle ones, and then more subtle ones. Simply that gives rise to a greater sense of well-being right here. If you do this on a regular basis, you find that you can nourish yourself again and again and again. And then you begin to realize why wait until you’re meditating to clear up these patterns of tension in the body. You can take your sensitivity to the breath energy in the body with you wherever you go. It’s like a protective shield, like an energy field in the body, that protects you from picking up energies from other people that may not be so good for you. Because all too often we soak up other people’s energy. Sometimes we even feel that when we’re dealing with somebody who’s angry or someone who’s sad, we have to feel sad along with them in order to really be sympathetic. You can be sympathetic or empathetic without having to absorb their energy. You need to fill your body with your own good energy as your own protection, because then you’re coming from a more solid basis and you’re coming from a stronger position. And you can actually be of more help. And as you develop more skill, more awareness, more skillful habits in the mind like this, you become more alert, more aware. You can catch yourself as you slip into old habits. And the quicker you are at catching these things, the easier it is to ask yourself, “Well, why do I have to engage in that habit again?” So these qualities of mindfulness, ardency, alertness, and awareness, and awareness, as they get strengthened through the meditation, become your protection as you go through the day. You pick up subtle ways in which you burden yourself unnecessarily. And you learn the skills you need in order to continue carrying that burden. So these are some important skills that we develop as we meditate. Someone might say, “Well, is this all you do in meditation, is learn how not to place unnecessary suffering on yourself?” That’s a huge issue right there. And it’s not a selfish project. Because, as I said, if you’re not weighing yourself down with unnecessary suffering, you’re in a better position to help other people, both in the good energy you’re giving off as you keep the mind centered. And in your understanding of what you are doing to add unnecessary suffering onto your own mind, you can give advice to others. And at the very least, they’re not being burdened with your greed, aversion, and delusion. So this is a happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. And as you develop this skill and you find that you have more to offer to others, the heart is lighter, your sense of the body is lighter, and you feel better nourished. So as you find the mind wandering off, wandering off, don’t get discouraged. This is an important skill we’re learning here. And it really does benefit you. It benefits everyone else. So whatever difficulties there are, they’re worth it.

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