A Foundation for Mindfulness

July 30, 2013

It’s easy enough to focus on the breath. The hard part is staying there. Staying there requires mindfulness, the ability to keep the breath in mind. Each time you breathe in, you have to remind yourself, “This is where you’re going to stay.” And the other thoughts that come bubbling up in the mind, you have to let them go. Don’t get involved. And because it’s so easy to get distracted by them, you really need to establish firm mindfulness, that you’re going to stay alert to the breath, and that anything unskillful that comes up in the mind, you’re not going to go with it. You’re just going to let it go. You’re working on developing skillful qualities. These are the basic things that you keep in mind. But you have to remember that mindfulness practice doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It happens in the context of your life. And the way you lead your life is going to have an impact on how you meditate. As the Buddha said, for mindfulness to be strong, it needs to be grounded in two qualities that he said are basic to all skillful qualities. One is purified virtue, and the other is views made straight. Virtue helps with mindfulness practice in two ways. One is it gives you practice in being mindful. You take on some precepts, which means you promise yourself you’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal, cheat, have illicit sex, you’re not going to lie. You’re not going to take intoxicants. Now, to stick with those precepts, you have to keep them in mind. If you forget them and go wandering off, your precepts are broken. You’ve broken the promise you made to yourself. So you have to remember. One of Ajahn Foo-yang’s students came to the monastery one time in Thailand. She made up her mind for the first time in life that she was going to take the eight precepts. In the afternoon, she walked past one of the guava trees there. The guava fruits were nice and ripe, and before she knew it, there was one in her mouth. Ajahn Foo-yang happened to see her and said, “Ah, what’s that in your mouth?” She suddenly remembered, “Oh, this was against one of the precepts she had taken.” That’s how you break a precept. Or one of the ways you break a precept is by forgetting. So you have to be very mindful and very alert to keep the precepts going. The other way that the precepts help you is by saving you from doing the kinds of actions you would later want to forget. Because if you want to forget something, you find it very easy to blot it out. If the mind has a tendency to blot things out, then it gets more and more difficult to be mindful. You see this with a lot of people who’ve done things that they really regret as they get older. They get very, very forgetful. Even things they want to remember, they start forgetting. So to help keep mindfulness strong, you want to make sure that your actions are not the sorts of ones you’re going to want to forget. Because the definition of mindfulness is that you remember what was done and said long ago. Of course, this requires that you develop the right attitude toward your past mistakes. You have to recognize that they weren’t good. It wasn’t right to act that way. But you can’t go back and erase them. And if you let yourself get eaten up by remorse right now, you’re weakening yourself in terms of how you’re facing the choices you have to make right now and on into the future. So you do the best that any human being can do, which is to recognize a mistake and resolve that you’re not going to repeat it. Then he says you develop goodwill for yourself and for all beings. Goodwill for yourself in the sense that you don’t want to beat yourself up over the mistake. Goodwill for all beings in the sense that you want to make sure that that’s motivating your actions. You don’t want to harm anybody. You don’t want to get around their memory of past mistakes by denying that there’s any good or bad. It’s becoming more and more endemic in our culture. People don’t like to hear about the idea that there’s something right and there’s something wrong, just as a way of making themselves feel better. But that doesn’t solve the problem, because then you never learn. There’s a therapy out there, something new with mindfulness, in which the therapist tells the client, “What you did in the past was just perfect for that moment in the past, but now you need to learn how to change your ways because the moment has changed.” Well, that doesn’t help anything at all. It may assuage somebody’s ego for a while, but then there’s never any change. And this is the Buddha’s basic instructions to Rahula in Rahuloga 7. You do your best not to do anything that’s going to cause any harm, but if you find that you did something like that, you talk it over. Many of us are ashamed of our mistakes because we were trained by people who came down hard on them. They were very compassionate in teaching us how not to repeat the mistake. So we have to root out that dynamic from the mind. Remember that mistakes are human. After all, we’re learning the ropes as we go along. But you do want to learn the ropes. So try to develop the attitude that if you’ve made a mistake, you’re willing to admit it and you want to learn. And when you have that attitude, then even though your virtues may not be perfectly pure, still you’ve developed a good, strong foundation for mindfulness. The ability to both recognize a mistake and to want to do something about it. Because mindfulness is not just passively watching things. It’s a process of remembering what things are skillful and what things are not. And how you can avoid the unskillful ones and how you can develop the skillful ones. And so practice and learning how to develop your skill in your words and deeds is going to help as you try to develop mindfulness in training the mind directly as you meditate. As for views made straight, that basically means conviction in the principle of karma, which means that your actions are the important things that you’ve really got to focus on. What other people say and do, you sometimes have to take into account. And sometimes you have to just let it pass. What they say is their business. What you say, what you do, is your business. And don’t let yourself get knocked off by other people’s actions or words, because your actions have consequences. There’s a passage where Dhananjani is dying, and Sariputta goes to see him and says, “I understand that you’ve been cheating.” He was a tax collector. I’m sorry, it wasn’t when he was dying. It was before he was dying. But Dhananjani had gotten married to a very greedy wife, and so as a tax collector, he said he was cheating the people in the name of the king and cheating the king in the name of the people. Sariputta goes to see him and says, “I hope you’re being heedful.” He says, “How can I be heedful? I’ve got a wife to look after and a family to raise and all this other stuff, all these responsibilities. I need that money.” Sariputta says, “Suppose at death the hell guardians come to take you, and you tell them, ‘Well, all the things I did wrong were because I had to look after my parents, I had to look after my wife.’” Sariputta says, “So cut me a little slack.” Dhananjani says, “No, they’re not going to cut you any slack at all.” It’s the same with our reactions to other people’s actions. If they do something unskillful, it doesn’t give us the right to do something unskillful. Of course, we always have the right to do anything skillful or unskillful, but it doesn’t excuse our doing something unskillful. This is where you have to keep focused on your actions. You can’t let other people’s actions and moods knock you off course. And the realization that your actions have results that last not only in this lifetime but also into future lifetimes, that’s what keeps you heedful. This, too, is an important basis for maintaining mindfulness, because it keeps focusing you back, back, back on what you’re doing and saying. And thinking in the present moment, which is what mindfulness is all about, is remembering that you want to stay focused here, right at the body, right at your feelings as they’re happening, right at mind states as they’re happening, right at the qualities you have to contemplate in order to make sure that your mind doesn’t get pulled off by its desires and fears and grief with reference to the world. So as you try to establish mindfulness, remember, it’s in the context of your life, and you want to have a life in which you can establish mindfulness in. So work on your virtue and make sure your views are made straight, straight in line with what the Buddha taught, that it’s your actions that matter, not anything else that anyone else may do. When these factors are strong, then your mindfulness can have a solid foundation. Keeping the breath in mind, keeping whatever your topic of meditation in mind, gets a lot easier.

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