Things You Tend to Overlook

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In that passage we chant frequently about aging, illness, and death, the Thai translation is interesting. Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal. And it’s good to keep their normalcy in mind. They’re there. And thinking about them is not necessarily going to bring them on. I know there are some people who are afraid even to think about them, for fear that if you think about illness, you’re going to get ill. If you think about death, you’re going to die. But that’s not the case. You’ve got to prepare for these things because they’re going to happen willy-nilly, one way or the other. The fact that you’re born means you’re going to be subject to these things. Someone once asked why so many people died in the tsunami about ten years ago. The answer, of course, is that they were born. If they didn’t die in the tsunami, they’re going to die in something else, from something else. And the same holds true for us. When death comes, there’s going to be pain. There’s going to be separation. We’ve got to prepare for these things because it is possible to experience these things and not suffer. That’s one of the best gifts that the Buddha gave us. He didn’t try to create a world or fantasize about a world where there was no death. He said, “Where is there in the mind something that doesn’t die?” That’s what he looked for and that’s what he found. And then he found the path. And finally, of course, he discovered the path that takes us there. That’s what we’re training ourselves in, the path that goes to what is free from aging, free from illness, free from death. Now, the path itself, of course, is something you have to put together. That’s what we’re working on right now. Putting together a state of concentration. It is a fabrication. And one of the aspects of fabrication in the mind is how you talk to yourself. In the text, they divide that into two things. Directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you evaluate it. You direct your thoughts to the weather and you decide whether you like the weather or not. That’s how you talk to yourself. You direct your thoughts to yesterday or tomorrow and make comments on these things, questions about these things. That’s the evaluation. So what we’re trying to do here is learn how to do this skillfully, first by getting the mind to focus on one thing. And so we become very sensitive to the extent to which our thinking shapes our experience. So we direct our thoughts to the breath, and then we evaluate it. Does the breath feel good? This is an essential part of concentration practice, getting the mind and the object of the mind to fit together nicely. Someone’s saying that you can’t really have real thinking and evaluation and concentration because then it’s not singleness of mind. Well, the singleness here is that all your thoughts are directed toward one object. And the purpose here is to get the mind to settle down even more snugly with the object. So what kind of breathing would you like right now? That’s one area where you’re free to choose. The training, in many ways, corners us here. There are a lot of things we can’t do here at the monastery, but this is one thing we can do, is explore inside. We’re trying to reduce the number of distractions outside. So you can focus your energy right here. How do you relate to the breath energy in your body? Do you even know that there is breath energy there? A lot of people just think it’s air coming in and going out. They say they can’t even sense anything moving anywhere in the body. Well, it’s a very subtle movement, and it’s very quick. And we’re so used to it, we don’t see it. But this is a signal feature of the meditation, is that we’re going to come back to see things that we’re so used to that we have learned to ignore them. So we cut aside our normal concerns and our normal ways of looking for pleasure, and we concentrate our concern inside. We look for pleasure inside. And we learn more and more about the breath as we do this. This is how we develop our discernment. We’re training ourselves in how to think about things. We’re training ourselves with the breath because that’s something that responds very quickly to your thinking. The way you conceive of the breath, think of the breath as an energy that comes in and out of the entire body, every pore of your skin, in and out of every nerve end. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does to the way you experience your breathing right now. When you get sensitive to how you can choose to talk to yourself about things like this, then you can switch your talking to other topics as well. One of the common ones, of course, is the distractions that come up in the mind. How do you prepare yourself so that when the mind feels tempted to go off and think about something else that’s totally irrelevant to the meditation? How do you detect that before it actually happens? There are warning signals. Again, these are things that we’ve learned to ignore, and the mind capitalizes on them. Here we are, supposed to be meditating, and all of a sudden you find yourself off on the other side of the world. How did it happen? Well, there were some curtains and screens and other things set up inside the mind. And what we’ve got to learn how to do is pull those aside and see them, see through them. So before it warrants, the mind does have its warning signals for when it’s going to go. It’s simply a matter of learning how to recognize them. Then there’s the issue of pain. You sit here for five minutes and your legs may go numb. And then tomorrow you sit here for a whole hour, no problem. The day after that, your legs are numb after fifteen minutes. How do you think about this? How do you think before this happens? Again, you’ve got to be prepared. When I was first meditating in Thailand, after I’d had a meditation ordained, we had hour and a half sits. Of course, being the only Westerner there, every move I made was duly noted by everybody. And so I felt I had to be a good representative of Westerners. So I resolved I would move only twice in the course of the hour and a half. And that meant that I had to be prepared at the very beginning. I could not wait until the pain had already come, or not wait until the numbness had already come. But think about how the breath energy was flowing, starting at the back of the neck and going down the spine. And even when there’s no sense of breath moving, you could sense, “Okay, there’s a tension at this vertebra and there’s one at that vertebra. Let’s see what happens when we can undo that tension.” Again, you become sensitive to things that have been there all along, but you haven’t noticed them. You’ve learned to overlook them. And as you undo the tension, at the same time you try to maintain the erectness of your posture, you find that you’re more and more in control of keeping the breath energy flowing well throughout the whole body. That means the blood is going to flow well. The energy in the nerves is going to flow well. But even then, there would be times when pain would come up. The question then is, how do you talk to yourself about the pain? This is the direct thought and evaluation again. What perceptions do you hold in mind when you think about the pain? Sometimes we subconsciously think of the pain as something that has an intention and it’s there to get us. Well, question that assumption. Or say, “It’s really bad at this one point.” Well, look into it. Is it really bad right there? If you find that even if you work with the breath, there’s still the pain there, then if you have the strength of concentration, look into it. Look at how you talk to yourself about it, the part that’s worried about it, afraid you’re going to paralyze your legs. You’re only sitting here for an hour. It’s not going to get paralyzed. Learn how to question. Dig up the things that the mind is saying about the pain. And Janmabhu has a nice set of questions. Exactly where is the pain? Where is the sharpest point of the pain? Does it stay in one point or does it move? Well, look. And is the pain the same thing as the spot in the body where it is? It’s like, say, you’ve got pain in your thigh. Does the pain saturate the thigh or is the pain one thing and your sensation of the thigh something else? And is there some point in the mind where you’ve put those two together? So we’re digging back in to see things that have been going on inside the mind, but we’ve learned how to ignore them because we were too busy worrying about other things. And in the meantime, we’ve developed a lot of bad habits that create a lot of unnecessary pain and suffering for ourselves, a lot of unnecessary stress. So look at how you talk to yourself about the breath. Look at how you talk to yourself about your distractions, how you understand what happens. See if you can change the way you think. Look at how you talk to yourself about the pain, about disturbing noises. Here comes a helicopter. Can you let the helicopter go? Your breath is still here. Just stay with the breath. Stay tuned in to the breath. Talk to yourself about the breath. Get interested in it. It’s the same way with the pain. We’re concerned about the pain. We want to run away from the pain. But if you just get interested in it, what is this process that you’ve been repeating over and over again? There are actions that the mind does. There are things that it shapes. That’s what the word “fabrication” means here. It’s shaped its experience of the pain. Can you pull that apart, at the very least shape it in a less unskillful way? Use this opportunity to get more sensitive to things that ordinarily get pushed into the background. Bring them up into the foreground so you can develop more skill around them and you find that you benefit a lot. You’re not the only one. The way you think has an impact on your actions, and of course your actions are going to have an impact on the people around you. This is why when people say, “Well, meditators are just in it for themselves and are not really concerned about the rest of the world,” that’s not the case. Your mind has an impact on the world around you. So when you train your mind well, all the people you touch benefit. So bring some light to these areas of your experience of your body and mind that ordinarily get blocked out. Because it’s in these areas where the most important discoveries are. It’s in these areas where you can find the path to the end of suffering. That’s been covered up for so long.

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