Not a One-note Dhamma

November 24, 2014

Start with some comfortable, deep, long, in-and-out breaths. Try to clean out the energy in your body. Then try to find a rhythm of breathing that feels just right. You can experiment with longer, shorter, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Deeper, more shallow. Or you can simply pose the question in the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” and see how the body responds. And keep on top of it, because sometimes a rhythm that feels good for a little while may not feel good after a while. So you can change. You want to be on top of things. You’re developing a quality called alertness. In other words, you focus on what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. When you’re in the present moment, you’re not just aware of anything at all in the present moment. You want to be focused. What are you doing right now? You’re staying with the breath. Are you really staying with the breath? Keep on top of things. We’re here to see things clearly, and that requires a whole constellation of qualities. Alertness is one of them. Mindfulness is what reminds you to stay here. Sometimes we hear mindfulness is defined as an open, accepting awareness. That’s not how the Buddha defined it. He defined it as a quality of your memory, your ability to keep something in mind. You don’t have to keep that much at the moment. Just remember you want to stay right here with the breath, and you want to be as comfortable with the breath as possible, as steadily with the breath as possible. That requires another quality called ardency. In other words, you put some effort into this, and you have to be selective in what you’re doing and what you’re not going to do. This is the factor of what they call right effort. That can mean several things. It can mean preventing unskillful qualities from arising. For instance, when the breath feels really good, it’s a lot easier to stay with it and you’re a lot less likely to start thinking about wandering off and playing around with your thoughts of past or future. If something unskillful has come up, in other words, if you find yourself wandering away from the breath for the duration of the meditation session, that’s going to be the definition of unskillful, i.e., something that pulls you away from your concentration. No matter how good the thought may be, no matter how wonderful or intelligent, or how inspiring, it’s not what you want right now. What you want right now is the ability to stay right here. So you let it go. If you find that you’ve lapsed, okay, come right back. And once you’ve come back, then you try to develop it, the concentration, so it’s easier to stay here. Reward yourself with a really good breath, and then another one, and then another one. Be on the lookout for any tendency that the mind might get bored a little bit or antsy, dissatisfied with the present moment, wanting to do something else. Sometimes there’ll be just a little blip of a thought, and then it’ll disappear. And then it’ll come back again, another blip, and after a while the blips begin to add up, and suddenly you find that they turn into a whole stream of another thought. So be on the alert for those little blips and try to snuff them out as quickly as you can. So there you are, four different things you’re doing. Preventing things that are unskillful from arising, abandoning things that are unskillful, giving rise to skillful things and then trying to maintain them once you’ve got there. This is a pattern that’s typical in all the Buddhist teachings. It doesn’t just give you one buzzword or one soundbite. Sometimes people complain about this aspect of the teaching. The Buddha gives lots of lists. There are the lists of the five strengths, the lists of the four kinds of right effort, the seven factors for awakening, the eightfold noble path. It’s almost like a list mania, but it’s not a mania at all. It’s making a very important point. You can’t just hold on to one key idea or one simple idea of what you’re doing here. There are gradations, balancing among different qualities. And there are steps in the practice. There are times when you have to hold on to some things and let go of others. We often hear that the practice is either something about accepting or letting go, as if one word like acceptance or one word like letting go could come to cover the whole thing. But it doesn’t. There are some things you’ve got to hold on to and other things you’ve got to let go. For the time being, you want to hold on to whatever is skillful. Because the mind needs its nourishment. If you try to let go of everything all at once, you find the mind goes sneaking off to find something new to feed on. So give it something good to feed on. Be open about the fact that you are holding on. Ajahn Chah has a nice image, coming back from the market carrying a coconut. Someone asked him, “What are you going to do with the coconut?” He said, “I’m going to eat it.” “Are you going to eat the rind? Are you going to eat the shell?” “No.” “Then why are you carrying that?” He said, “How are you going to answer?” You answer out of desire. In other words, the desire to give a good answer is what’s going to give rise to your discernment. So right there you’ve got something you’ve got to hold on to. It’s that desire to have something to eat, to have some discernment, the desire to do something well. And of course, the answer is, the time hasn’t come yet to throw away the rind or the shell. You can’t just take the coconut flesh. You have to take the whole thing and then you get it back. And then when the time comes that you’ve got the flesh out, then you can let go of the rind, you can let go of the shell. It’s the same with the practice. A lot of things you’ve got to hold on to. The path is something that you hold on to, that you work on. You develop, you maintain it, you protect it. And that’s just one of the Four Noble Truths. Any suffering that comes up in the mind, you want to comprehend it. What’s going on here? What exactly is the suffering? You can see it coming and going, but then you have a chance of seeing what’s causing it. What, when the suffering comes, did you do? And what did you do when the suffering started? When did it stop? Here we’re talking about suffering in the mind. Seeing that allows you to understand what the cause is, and that’s what you let go of. All too often we want to let go of the suffering, but it doesn’t work. You have to let go of the cause. It’s like a broken pipe in your house. You come down into your basement, and the basement’s full of water. So you just try to keep coming to bail out the water. You’re not going to come to the end of the water until you’ve found out where the pipe is that’s broken and where the water main is, so that you can turn that off. Then you can bail out the water, and there’s nothing new that’s coming in. So when there’s stress, you have to look at what’s coming along with the stress. You’ve got to develop the qualities of the path that allow you to do the comprehending of the stress. For the most part, we don’t want to comprehend stress. We want to run away from it. But you have to learn how to sit with it for a while to notice when it comes, when it goes, and have that steadiness of mind that’s willing to look carefully at this, and frankly and honestly. Because sometimes the things that bring stress are things that we like. And if you can’t step back from your likes, it’s going to be hard to let go of them, or even to realize that they’re causing the trouble. So you need the concentration to give you a place to step back. So you work on that. As the Buddha said, the task there is to develop it, develop all the factors of the path, so that they can provide you with a good foundation. When the mind is solidly based like this, then it can comprehend the stress. It can see, “Oh, this is what I’m doing that’s causing the stress, and it’s something that’s totally unnecessary, and I’d be better off if I didn’t keep on doing it.” And you let go. Letting go here means that you see that you’re doing something that has been habitual, and you learn how to stop. So the Buddha was not a one-man no-teacher. He taught the Dhamma in clusters, factors that you have to bring together so that they can strengthen one another and keep one another in balance. A large part of the path is realizing, “What do you have to do right now? What’s the proper step right now? Where are you on the path? Are you at the point where you still have to carry the rind, or are you at the point where you throw the rind away?” In the coconut, there are just those two stages. With the path, there are a lot more qualities in the mind that you have to develop so you can depend on them. New committee members you want to add to your mind so you can push out the ones that have been holding power for a long time and are really unskillful. So always keep in mind that the path has many stages. And sometimes what’s appropriate for one stage is not appropriate for another. You might make a comparison with building a chest of drawers. While you’re cutting the wood and building the chest of drawers, you have to make pencil marks on it so you know where to cut. Then when it’s done, you erase the pencil marks and you don’t put pencil marks on it ever again. Anyone who tries to put a pencil mark on it afterwards gets beat. You know, slapped across the wrist. Because that’s not the time for pencil marks. So have a sense of what’s appropriate right now in your practice, what you’re lacking. If you’re lacking concentration, that’s something you want to work on, you want to hold to. As John Fuhrman once said, “You have to be really crazy about the concentration to do it well.” The attitude of the mind is that you keep wanting to come back to your object. And you want to do it well. There will come a point where you let it go, but that’s at the very end of the path. It’s only at the very end where things get boiled down to one duty, i.e., the duty to let go. But before then, you’ve got a whole range of duties, a whole range of skills you want to develop. So try to keep this larger view of the path in mind. It’s a mistake if you come to the spiritual life thinking, “Well, I can just depend on one idea that will take care of everything.” This attitude usually comes from the fact that most of us don’t have much time. But if you really want to get some benefits out of the practice, you have to be able to make time for it and realize that it’s a constant and complex skill that you’re working on. It’s going to take time, but it’s really worth the effort. And it’s really worth making time for it. Don’t let your other priorities squeeze out the priority of training your mind, because the mind is the most important thing you’ve got. And training it is the most important thing you can do.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/141124_Not_a_One-note_Dhamma.mp3>