Why Meditate

January 31, 2015

Take stock of your body, take stock of your mind. Put your body in position, your hands on your lap, back relatively straight, facing forward, eyes closed. Now take stock of your mind. Where is your mind? Is your mind leaning right now? Is it inclined to stay here in the present moment, or is it inclined to go someplace else? If it looks like it’s heading off someplace else, you’ve got to bring it back. There are lots of different ways of doing that. Some of those reflections we had just now in the chatting can help. If you’re heading off to something that depends on your body, your mind, and your body, you can remind yourself, “Okay, this body is subject to aging, illness, and death. It’s heading off to people or things you love. You’re going to be separated from them eventually, at some point.” So you can ask yourself, “Is that a really useful thing to be thinking about right now?” Or would you like to develop a basis for that fifth contemplation, that we’re heirs to our actions? Where do our actions come from? They come from our mind. And the state of the mind is going to determine what kind of actions you’re going to fall heir to. You want something that’s good, something that’s conducive to long-term happiness. When you think in these ways, it inclines the mind back to the present moment. If you find yourself angry at somebody, remind yourself, “Who’s being burned by your anger right now?” Do you want to keep burning yourself this way? Or would it be better to cool things off? That’s why we have those contemplations on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. The equanimity is there to remind you that there are a lot of things you can’t control in this life. So you want to focus your attention on what you can control. And one thing you should be able to control is your own mind. Now, if you can’t control that, it’s difficult to control other things. So again, that thinking inclines you back. And if this is unfamiliar territory, you have to learn how to acquaint yourself to what it is to be focused in the present moment. You’ve got your general unfocused awareness, and you have a focal point someplace. So bring that focal point to the breath. At the same time, try to keep your awareness of the breath. Realize that it’s not just at one spot where the breath is happening. It’s happening on many levels in all different parts of your body. There’s the energy that allows the air to come in your lungs and go out. There’s also more subtle energy that runs along the nerves and runs along the blood vessels. There are some very still and subtle energy spots in the body, and there’s even a cocoon of subtle energy around the body. Focus on what you can detect, and try to make the breath and your focus comfortable. In other words, try to breathe in a way, in a rhythm that feels good for the body right now. Also a rhythm that you’re able to follow. If it’s too subtle in the beginning, your mind’s going to lose its focal point and then it’s off adrift someplace else. You might want to experiment with focusing on different parts of the body to see where it feels most natural to stay with the breath and where it sensitizes you to energies in the body that you might otherwise not have noticed. John Lee talks about the spot just two inches below the sternum, or right at the tip of the sternum, the little bone right between the two halves of your ribcage. It’s a very sensitive spot, so try to make that as comfortable as you can, and you’ll find it has an impact all over the body. And as for your focus, you’ve got to figure out how much pressure you’re going to put on it, because it’s very easy, especially in the beginning stages, to think that if you’re going to stay focused on one point, you’ve kind of clamped down on it. And if you’re not clamping down, you’re going to go floating off. So as you get more skillful, you’ll find that you don’t have to clamp down so hard. And if you clamp down too hard, it gets very restrictive. The Buddha’s image is of a person holding a baby quail in his hands. If he holds it too tightly, the quail’s going to die. If he holds it too loosely, the quail’s going to fly away. So you have to hold it just right. And as the mind settles down, then you try to keep it there. You’ve probably heard the Buddha’s teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self, or sometimes it’s impermanence, suffering, and not-self. You may think that, “Well, he’s teaching that everything comes and goes, so just be okay about us coming and going.” But that’s not the purpose of those teachings. In fact, when you’re doing concentration, you’re working against that. In other words, you’re trying to find something that is easeful. You’re not trying to find something that you can maintain. That’s not inconstant. Then you want to have it under your control. Control here means not being a control freak. Skillful control means knowing when to let go of things, but not letting them go too far. It’s like having them on a leash. If the leash is too long, they go wandering off, and it’s going to be hard to find them and hard to untangle the leash when you do. But if you keep things on a short leash, they can wander out a little bit. But they’ll come back, especially if you give them something good to feed on. So you’re trying to get acquainted inside with how you can get your mind settled with a sense of ease right here, a sense of balance right here, and see how far you can push things in terms of being constant, easeful, and under your control. This is what strengthens the mind. When the mind is strong, when it’s still, it’s able to see things clearly and it has the strength to do what needs to be done, both inside and out. Because there are times when we don’t know what the skillful thing might be to do, so we have to be very quiet and watch. When you have doubts about what’s the right thing or the wrong thing, the Buddha recommends just watch and see. If you do it, it leads to pain, and when you do it, it leads to pleasure. We’re talking about long-term. Some of that you learn from reading or listening to Dhamma talks, but a lot of it you have to learn from just watching yourself in action. Where are you going to get a better sense of what really works or not than by watching yourself? To watch yourself, the mind has to be still. Because otherwise you miss a lot of things that are happening. Then there are times when you know what the right thing might be to do, but you just don’t have the strength to do it. But if the mind feels well-nourished and well-fed with a sense of well-being inside that comes from staying with the breath on friendly terms, you find you’re able to do skillful things that you couldn’t have done before. You’re more up for it. You don’t feel defeated by the challenge. So this sense of well-being that you can create inside, it can, when you stay with it for a while, get very intense. And that’s fine. Some people are worried of getting stuck on concentration. But the drawbacks of being stuck on concentration are a lot worse than the drawbacks of being stuck on other things, things that can lead you to act in all kinds of unskillful ways. Because where are you going to go if you don’t go for pleasure in your concentration? You go back to your sensual pleasures. And the pursuit of sensual pleasures has a lot of problems. It can really fog the mind and weaken the mind. So you forget what the right thing is to do and you find yourself doing all kinds of stupid things. And when you realize what the right thing to do might be, you don’t have the strength to do it. So the concentration is a kind of pleasure that’s harmless. As for learning how not to get stuck on it, eventually you find as you fight against inconsistency, stress, and not-self, you run up against a wall, that you’re constant, easeful, under control, stable state of mind can go only so far. And that’s when you start looking for something better. So as long as you really earnestly want to find happiness, this is where you find hope. It’s in that fifth contemplation. Aging, illness, death, separation, all sounds pretty miserable. And sometimes when you hear that fifth contemplation, “But we’re only owners to our actions, heir to our actions,” that sounds pretty miserable, too, because you can think of all the unskillful things you’ve done. But it’s in that principle that also lies hope. You can do good. You can do things skillfully. As that passage for the Buddha says, “The mind is radiant.” When you understand that the mind is radiant, then you can train it. Now, the radiance here doesn’t mean it’s pure or that it’s free from ignorance. It’s bright, which means it can see things. You can see what’s going on in the mind. It also means that if you find that you’ve been dealing in greed, aversion, and delusion in the past, it doesn’t put a permanent stain on the mind. The mind can change, if you’re willing to change it. And when you clear away the greed, aversion, and delusion, there’s no trace left. But it requires work. The analogy here, probably the best one, is John Lee’s. He says it’s like seawater. There’s clear water in the ocean. There’s fresh water in the salt water. But you’re not going to get it by just letting it sit there. You have to distill it. Some people think that because the mind is radiant, all you have to do is let its radiance shine and there you are, at the end of the problem. But it’s more like the fresh water. You have to distill it. You have to put in some energy. You have to use your discernment. You have to use your imagination to figure things out. And then you can get the salt water to turn into fresh water through the distillery. The salt gets put aside and there you’ve got it, fresh water. It requires work. It requires that you put in time and effort. But it’s time and effort well spent. It’s your ticket out of here, this world where there’s so much aging, illness, and death, and separation. It’s your actions that offer you the hope of a real happiness, a happiness that doesn’t disappoint, a happiness that doesn’t change. So right here is your foundation, your awareness here in the present moment. It’s right next to the breath. Without the breath, you couldn’t move the body, you couldn’t get it to do anything. So it’s right here that all the decisions are being made. So you want to be very clear right here, very settled right here, so you can learn how to make them well.

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