Problem Solving

June 13, 2015

The Buddha’s path is a path to find happiness. The word in Pali, sukha, has a wide range of meanings. It can be pleasure, ease, well-being, bliss. When the Buddha’s talking about happiness, he wants us to be happy. To be connoisseurs of our pleasure, ease, and bliss. To get a sense of what we’re doing that’s helping create happiness. And realizing that there are many levels, that you have many choices in what you could be doing to find happiness. And you want to use your power of choice here as skillfully as you can. Because there are lots of pleasures out there that turn sour, lots of pleasures that cause harm. One of the reasons we’re meditating is to get sensitive to levels of pleasure that can be created within the mind itself, sitting here with a minimum amount of input from outside. So you start with something simple, like the breath coming in and going out. Ask yourself, “Does it feel good?” And you may not be sure. So you can experiment with different ways of breathing, and develop your sensitivity by comparing them. This is a lot of what discernment is. It’s finding two different things and comparing them, and deciding that one is better than the other. And then testing that decision. And if it seems to be okay over time, file that away. That for this particular state of the body, this particular state of the mind, this kind of breathing is good. You focus here, you breathe in a certain way. And then next time you meditate, see if it’s the same. The body may change, the mind may change. This is why you need a range of tools. But they all come down to this. What can you do to get the mind to stay here in the present moment with a sense of well-being? Sometimes the problem is in the body. There may be a pain here, or there’s an illness, or there’s a problem with your posture. You can work with that. You might want to check and see which of your various pains are actually caused by the way you breathe, or aggravated by the way you breathe. You may have an injury that is bothering you. Ask yourself, “When I breathe in, breathe out, how do I visualize the breath relating to that injury? Is it helping, or is it creating a problem?” If it seems to be creating a problem, think of the breath going in another direction. You may have a sense, usually, of the breath expanding through the body. Well, how about it coming from the skin, from all directions, and moving in toward the center? See what that does. If the breath going down the body seems to be part of the problem, think of it coming up. There’s a fair amount that you can play with here. Just learn how to turn things around and to make comparisons. Other times, though the problem is not with the body, it’s with the mind. You’re carrying thoughts of the day, thoughts of the past week. In some cases, you can just use the breath to brush them aside. In other cases, they’re more persistent. They want to hang on. They’re insistent that they have some importance. This is when you may have to use other techniques or other topics of meditation. When you’re feeling lazy, usually thoughts of daily life come to mind. Death can be helpful. You don’t know. Tonight could be the night the great earthquake comes, and the epicenter is right here in Valley Center, and that’s the end of the monastery. It just gets flattened. That could happen. Then you ask yourself, “Do I want to spend my last night just frittering my time away?” Well, no. You’ve got the opportunity to meditate. Do something useful with your time. Then the mind will say, “Well, the meditation is not going very well. This is bad for me.” Well, it’s not. Good meditation, of course, is better. But the fact that you’re sitting here trying to meditate is a good thing. In other words, you learn how to argue with those voices in the mind that are tearing you down. Yes, it’s up to you. Do you really want happiness? Yes. Are you willing to do what’s required? Well, maybe. Try to make it a definite yes. Someone to do what’s needed for true happiness. Once you’ve got that attitude, then all the various techniques are more likely to work. So you can try thoughts of the Buddha to encourage you, thoughts of the Dhamma, the Sangha, thoughts of what goodness you’ve done in the past in terms of generosity or the precepts. These are some of the standard topics. And you might find that you have some unstandard topics that help. There are times in Thailand when I would think about all the poor people who would put food in my bowl. And it’s really sobering to be the recipient of poor people’s generosity. You feel a bigger debt than normal. So I would use that to encourage myself to practice. So whatever you can think of that gets the mind with the breath and helps get the breath comfortable. Sometimes people complain that they can’t find a comfortable breath in the body. That may simply be because they’re fighting the way the body wants to breathe. Their conception of the breath is getting in the way. Then we have different breath energies that they’re trying to push against. Sometimes we have a feeling that the sensations you feel in the body here have to be permeated by breath in order for there to be a sensation of breath. Well, those sensations themselves may be breath. And if you try to push another breath through them, then you’re going to create trouble. So whatever sensations you have, try to see them as an aspect of breath energy. Then ask yourself, how can you coordinate all these different breath energies in the body? Instead of trying to push them against each other, push them through each other. Allow them to live in peace. So even if the meditation is not going well, it’s a good opportunity to try things out, to learn. And to try to be observant of both sides, i.e., problems in the body, problems in the mind. And what seems to be, say, a problem in the body may not necessarily be a problem in the body. It may come from the mind. So look around and ask yourself, if you’re sitting here meditating and saying, “I don’t want to be here,” where would you rather be? What of the mind comes up with an answer? And then examine that answer. What good would that particular place be right now? Can it actually help you understand your own mind? You might say, “Well, I don’t like meditating here. I could meditate someplace else.” The best place to meditate is where you are. So learn how to wrangle down some of these thoughts that are getting in the way. And if a particular technique works, file it away for future reference. Now, don’t think that you’ll find the magic bullet that’s going to work all the time. This is one of the ways in which we get very doubtful about our abilities as meditators. You find something that works tonight, and you say, “Okay, this is going to solve the problem of my meditation from now on in.” And then you find out two days later that it’s not working anymore. That’s because you’ve got a different problem. The technique you had worked for that particular problem that you had before, but now it’s not working because you’ve got a different problem. If you misunderstand things, you may think, “Well, I thought I knew something about what was going on, but I don’t understand anything at all,” and then you give up. You’ve got to remember the mind is complex. It can come up with lots of different problems, some of which may look the same on the surface but actually are coming from something else. So just keep filing away. Whatever seems to work tonight, file that away. Whatever seems to work tomorrow night, file that away. And eventually you’ll come to the end of the different problems or the different varieties of things the mind can do, and you’ve got a technique to work for all of them. So it’s good to reflect on your meditation. As the hour ends, you might want to stop and reflect. What worked tonight? What didn’t work tonight? File away for future reference. That’s what mindfulness is for—to remember things. Remember things that have and haven’t worked in the past. So you can try them again. A new problem comes up and you say, “Well, maybe this one is not working, but I can make a few changes here and there.” And over a while, you begin to get a better and better sense of how you can master the different problems that the mind creates. And the meditation becomes more and more of a skill. You’re not just here sitting, waiting by the roulette wheel, hoping that the little ball is going to fall into your slot, and learning how to be patient and an equanimous when it doesn’t. Equanimity has its role, but it’s not everything. After all, when the Buddha talked about nibbana, he didn’t say it’s the highest equanimity. He said it’s the highest happiness. Equanimity is a tool. Learning how to be patient is a tool. And as with all tools, there are times when they’re useful and there are times when they’re not. There are times when you need a saw. Sometimes you need a hammer. Sometimes you need a tool to remove the nails that you put in. Equanimity has its use. But there are times when it’s not what you want. As the Buddha said, if you just hang out in equanimity, accepting everything, the mind doesn’t develop. Wisdom doesn’t develop. Wisdom comes from asking questions and seeing things in terms of cause and effect, and then manipulating them to see what works best. Even though it may be a struggle to get the mind to settle down, the fact that you’re making the struggle, if you’re observant enough, is what is going to give rise to discernment. Some people need to develop a fair amount of discernment before the mind will settle down. Others find it pretty easy to lull the mind into concentration. And discernment will come later. But if you’re the type that needs to wrestle the mind down, remind yourself that at least you’re learning things about cause and effect as you’re getting the mind to settle down. So that when problems come up in the future, you’ll be more likely to be able to solve them. And the time spent trying to understand the mind is not time wasted. It’s just learning more about the ins and outs of the mind. And that’s all for the good.

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