In Training

December 29, 2015

The Buddha taught a method of training the mind to go beyond suffering and find true happiness. It’s worth noting that he doesn’t define mind or suffering or happiness, probably because your sense of the mind and your sense of suffering and happiness will change as you practice Who is it that’s doing the practice? What counts as suffering? What counts as happiness? Your sense of these things will get more and more refined as you practice. What the Buddha does define, though in very clear terms, is the training. He says, “These are the steps you follow. These are the qualities of mind that you want to develop.” So that’s where we should focus our attention. What are we doing to train the mind? The training falls into three large categories. There’s virtue, concentration, and discernment. Virtue is a matter of starting out to learn how to avoid actions that are going to be harmful to yourself or to others. The Buddha gives you a list to start with, and then you work with that list. Then again, your sense of harm, or what counts as harm, is going to get more subtle as you practice. Concentration is a matter of getting the mind to settle down and be really still, solid in the present moment, so that it’s not affected by things changing. And then discernment is what allows you to see what you’re doing on very subtle levels within the mind that’s getting in the way of your happiness. It’s causing suffering, causing stress, however you want to define dukkha. In John Lee’s image, he says it’s like building a bridge. Virtue corresponds to the pilings of the bridge on this side of the river. Discernment is the pilings on the other side of the river. Concentration is the set of pilings that go right down in the middle of the river. When you’re building a bridge, it’s that middle set of pilings. Those are the hard ones. Those require the most work to get the mind to settle down and be still. So that’s what we’re working on right now. Training the mind, using the fact that the mind is aware and it’s thinking, to see if we can put the awareness and the thinking together in a way that actually gets things still. In the beginning of right concentration, the Buddha says, there’s directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you make up your mind, you’re going to direct your thought to something like, in our case, the breath, and then you evaluate how things are going. This begins simply by noticing when the mind is with the breath and when it’s not. And when it’s wandered off, you can bring it back. And you try to figure out, why does the mind leave? Why can’t it stay with the breath? Is there something wrong with the mind or is there something wrong with the breath? If there’s something wrong with the mind, in other words, you’re carrying in some issues from the day, you may have to stop for a bit and deal with those issues first before the mind is willing to settle down with the breath. So if there’s any anger about something that somebody did in the course of the day, you might want to stop and spread thoughts of goodwill first to yourself, because you realize that the anger is not helpful to yourself. If you have goodwill for yourself, why would you want to stay wallowing in the anger? Then you can try a little bit of goodwill for the other person, remembering that they’re not totally evil. And if they’re totally evil, then you have to feel compassion for them. You have to feel sorry for all the trouble they’re causing themselves and others. In other words, sort through the issues that are pulling the mind away from the breath. Try to find a way of thinking your way around those issues so that they don’t have that pull anymore. Then you can get back to the breath. So here you’re using thinking to get the mind so it can stop thinking for a while. In other words, you’re already beginning to use a little bit of discernment. As the Buddha said, you need both insight and tranquility in order to get the mind in a solid concentration. You can’t just use force. There has to be a certain amount of understanding. One understanding is that the things you might be wandering out to think about right now are not really worth it. Your plans for tomorrow, your memories of today, those can take care of themselves. You don’t have to tend to them. You don’t have to look into them and sort them out or try to squeeze a little pleasure out of them or whatever. You want to do something really special with the mind. You’re trying to realize the as-yet unrealized and attain the as-yet unattained. So we have to do something we haven’t done yet to work on the mind. When you’ve got the right attitude, then the next question is, “Is there anything wrong with the breath?” You can try different ways of breathing to see what kind of breathing is just right for you right now. Not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light, not too deep, not too shallow. Like the porridge in the Goldilocks story, just right. How do you know? Well, try different kinds of breathing and see how the mind responds, see how the body responds. Because the body has its needs. Sometimes we think that concentration requires that the breath be really subtle and smooth and gentle, and yet the body needs more breath energy. If you don’t give it that breath energy, it’s going to feel weak. It’s going to feel weak and tired. Sometimes concentration requires that you start out with some really deep, strong breathing. Now, when you’re sitting in a group like this, you don’t want to breathe so strongly that other people can hear you breathe, but strong enough to give a sense of energy inside. And then you tend to things. Watch over it. Come together and they feel okay. Don’t worry about the fact that there’s no big rush of, say, rapture. You can read about the states of concentration and say, “When’s the rapture going to come? When is the pleasure going to come?” All the other good things you read about. Well, they come in small doses first. So when you’re with the breath, the mind is here. Maintain that. Because that’s what’s going to grow into deeper concentration. If you just look at it and say, “This feels kind of ordinary, nothing really special. There must be something else,” and then you go leaving this and trying to find something else, or squeeze something out of the breath, or squeeze something out of the mind, these qualities don’t come from squeezing. They come from just sticking with what you’ve got and getting more sensitive to what you’ve got and allowing the breath and the mind to begin to come together. Ultimately, they get to a point where I feel like they’re one, the breath and the energy seem to flow together throughout the body. When there’s a sense of ease, you want to make use of it. Think of that comfortable breath spreading to different parts of the body. You may be focused on one spot, and you can either think of the comfortable energy from that spot spreading, or you can just go around to different spots in the body and check it out. How does it feel down around the abdomen? How does it feel in the chest? How does it feel in the middle of the head? Down the back, out the legs. Down the shoulders, out the arms. Out to every pore of the skin. You can wander around the body for a while, checking things out, because you want to get familiar with this territory. When you breathe in, where are the channels of breath? John Lee talks about this a lot, the breath channels in the body. In other words, there are some parts of the body where it seems like they’re the main roads or the main rivers through which the energy flows. And then there are the side roads, little canals off the river. You want to get acquainted with these things so that you begin to realize that there’s one spot in the body where, if you stay focused there, it connects up with everything else. For some people, this is going to be in different places. For some people, it’s right at the tip of the breastbone. For other people, it’s in the middle of the head. For other people, it can be down around the navel, wherever you have a sense that everything connects there. You want to make that your spot, because that will be the spot that you want to focus on, not only while you’re here meditating with your eyes closed, but also when you go out in the world. You want to have that spot. It’s both a grounding for the mind and a place where you can be sensitive to what’s going on. It’s good to choose a spot where, say, if anger comes up, there’s going to be a little twinge right in that spot. Or if fear comes up, there’s going to be a little twinge there. And if it’s not tended to, that twinge will begin to spread through the body. But if you’re there at that spot and the twinge comes up, you can disperse it, breathing right through it. And that’ll help to deprive the fear or the anger of its foothold in the body. You can deal with it a lot more effectively that way. It’s just kind of an early warning system that you’ve got here. And it’s an aid in dealing with what’s going on in the mind. So try to find a spot, your spot, in the body. And this will take a while. Of course, you can have many different spots. The more the better, if they all work. But after a while, you’ll find that there’s one spot where it feels really sensitive for you. And as you get more and more sensitive to that particular spot, your sense of what counts as stress in the body, what counts as pleasure in the body, is going to change. Your sense of the capabilities of the mind, its ability to stay stick with something for long periods of time, that’s going to change too. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn’t define these terms with set-in-stone kind of definitions. You’re dealing with your mind as you sense it. You’re dealing with your sense of pleasure and pain as you sense it. And as you work with the training, these things are going to change. So focus on the training. Focus on what you’re doing and the extent to which your mind really is in training. If you’re willing to get the most out of the meditation, you have to approach it like an athlete. An athlete’s in training. The athlete has to avoid certain foods, has to set up a schedule. And focus really on making the most of the strength of the body, the skills of the body, and also the strength of the mind, so that he or she can perform better. Well, it’s the same with meditation. There are certain things you’ve got to learn how to avoid. This is what the precepts are about. But you also find that there are certain situations, certain friends that you might have, that you begin to realize these are not good for your mind. This is not the case if you’re going to abandon your friends, but you have to ask yourself, “Who are the people I’m hanging out with? Who are the people that I’m taking as my models for behavior?” Sometimes we don’t consciously take people as models, but there’s a kind of influence that comes when you hang around with people. You pick up their ideas, their attitudes, and you may decide that some of the people that are your friends might be better treated as acquaintances. And you look at the things you do, the food you eat. And when we’re talking about friends, it’s not only friends in the flesh, but also the places where you hang out, the internet, the social media. You’ve got to be very careful about what influences you’re taking in. Because after all, this is your mind. This is your happiness. This is your pain. These are things you have to look out for. And if you don’t look out for them, nobody else is going to look out for them for you. And there are a lot of people out there who don’t really care about these issues. And if you give yourself over to their influence, you’re going to stop caring as well. And then what have you got? Nobody’s going to do it for you. So we’re focused on issues that are really immediate for us. And the problem of pain and suffering really is the big problem. When he taught the Four Noble Truths, he wasn’t just giving us interesting information about suffering. He’s basically saying this is the issue in life. The fact that we’re suffering, we’re causing ourselves unnecessary suffering, and we can stop. That’s quite a training he’s offering. That’s quite an opportunity that he’s offering to us. So if we decide that the problem of our suffering is something we want to tackle, this is how we do it. We give ourselves to the training. And the less you hold back, the more you’re going to gain. So ultimately you find out what are the potentials that we have here in the mind. When the Buddha talks about the ultimate happiness, how ultimate is it? How happy is it? What kind of happiness can it be? At the moment, for most of us, these are just questions. But they’re questions that we can answer if we give ourselves to the training.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2015/151229_In_Training.mp3>