Shaking Off Bad Habits

January 7, 2016

Many of us come to meditation because we realize the mind needs a place to rest. It needs to pull away from all of its daily activities and responsibilities and just have some time for itself. That’s a perfectly legitimate motivation for coming. Because if the mind doesn’t rest, it’s like a knife that hasn’t been sharpened. You just keep using it and chopping it. And it gets duller and duller and duller. It gets so it can’t cut through things. You’ve got to stop, take some time away from the chopping, and focus directly on the knife. It’s the same with the mind. You have to stop and put down your responsibilities of the day and focus directly on the mind to give it a sense of well-being inside. Let it gather around the breath. Let the breath be comfortable. You can either experiment with different kinds of breathing to see what feels best, or, if you find that the more you experiment with the breath, the worse it gets, you just say, “Well, just let the breath do what it’s going to do.” Find a spot in the body that’s more comfortable than the rest and stay there. And give the mind permission not to go after things that it normally has to go after or has a sense that it has to go after. Then when the mind is rested, you can take on your other responsibilities. But after a while, you begin to realize that it’s not the responsibilities that are the problem. There are things in the mind that need to be changed. And that’s what we’re really here for, to change our minds. The mind has habits that, when you look at them, you realize, “This is not skillful. It creates trouble for other people. It creates trouble for you.” Often, as the mind gets more quiet with the meditation and then comes out to its daily activities, the more quickly you’re going to see that this is a problem and that’s a problem inside the mind itself. So how are you going to deal with these problems? This is where the Buddhist teachings on determination come in handy. You make up your mind that you’re going to make some changes, and you have to do it in a way that’s really effective. The first quality the Buddha recommends is discernment. In other words, seeing what you can handle, which members of the community or other ones that you’re going to take down, and how you’re going to go about it. If you find that you’ve got lots of unskillful members in the committee, it’s wise to focus on one or two just to begin with. Because if you take them on all at once, then you don’t do an effective job with any of them, and that gets you discouraged. So try to find one thing that you find that you really need to work on. If it’s speech, focus on trying to develop right speech. Often this is one of the main problems. This is where you begin to see the problems of the mind, is how they come out in your speech. So you’ve got to learn how to have some restraint over what you say and how you say it. Which means that there’ll still be obstreperous members in the committee, but you’re learning how to muzzle them. You’re learning how to have a gap between thought coming from the mind and that it’s being transmitted out through the mouth. We all need that gap. Sort of check what’s going on. Is it true? Is it beneficial? Is it timely? You have to have time to ask these questions. And if you don’t ask these questions of your speech, you’re setting yourself up for trouble. So speech may be the issue you decide to focus on. Your duty for discernment is to figure out how you’re going to notice when you’re going against what you’re originally determined to do. And here’s when you have to be really sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. Meditation helps a lot here, because you begin to notice that the mind sends little messages to itself in little blips. “I’d like to say this. I’d like to do this. I can’t stand this.” Whatever. They’re very quick little thoughts. They’re like the subliminal messages on TV. They flash so quickly that most of your conscious mind doesn’t pick them up. But they register someplace in the mind, and then they make little decisions for you. And if you don’t counteract them quickly, there’s going to be trouble. So your discernment is not just choosing the right things to focus on and figure out the right way to deal with them, but it’s also being sensitive to how bad habits sneak into the mind. You can see this in your meditation. You’re sitting here focused on the breath, and there’ll be a little blip of the thought that you want to think about tomorrow. And then you’re back to the breath. And as far as you know, you’re still with the breath, but something’s been set in motion in another part of the mind. And if you’re not quick enough to say, “No,” the urge to think about tomorrow is going to wait until you have a slight lapse in your mindfulness, and then it’s gone. So you want to learn how to be quick to the little blips in the mind. Alert to the blips, quick enough to counteract them. So you find the mind is getting a little unstable with the breath. Be more and more determined to find where in the body is there an unsent uncomfortable sensation of any kind related to the breath. No matter how subtle, you’ve got to work with that. In other words, increase your determination to do something skillful and to do it in a way that feels really good. Because often the motivation for those little blips is that you’re getting impatient, you want to look for some pleasure, and you don’t see any pleasure right immediately around, so you come up with some other idea. And then you’re gone. So give the mind pleasure through the breath. Give the mind pleasure through the concentration. There are healthy ways of finding pleasure in the present moment, so make the most of those. As the Buddha said about the case of sensuality, if you don’t have an alternative source of pleasure, then no matter how much you know that sensuality is bad, you’re still going to go for it. And that same principle applies to a lot of other unskillful habits. They’re looking for a quick fix, a quick hit. And if you can provide the mind with a sense of well-being through the concentration, that weakens those urges. So discernment is the first quality the Buddha recommended. Truth is the second. In other words, you really carry through your determination. You don’t let it get waylaid. Then you learn how to say no even to really strong urges. So if speech is the area you’re focusing on, you really stick with your determination no matter what. If something’s unskillful, if it’s not true, beneficial, and timely, you’re not going to say it. You’re old to that. Because your truthfulness is one of the ways in which you prove to yourself you can really do this. And this is one of the ways in which you give yourself confidence that you can handle other problems as well. So realize the importance of holding through your determination. And then carry that through. Because, after all, it is your well-being we’re talking about. And if you don’t look after your well-being, who else is going to do that for you? And if part of the mind says, “Well, it’s kind of selfish just to look after your well-being,” well, the fact that you’re trying to make yourself more skillful is not benefiting just you. It’s benefiting all the people around you as well. So whatever way you can manage to motivate yourself to stick truthfully with your determination, stick with it. Think of it as an act of compassion for yourself. Whether you focus on the dangers of not following through or it’s simply a matter of pride, you want to show to yourself that you can do this. All of these are valid ways of motivating yourself. The third quality is relinquishment. In other words, any temptation that would pull you away from your determination, you let it go. You learn how to recognize it and let it go. This can come in all kinds of guises. Sometimes it seems to come in the guise of someone saying, “Well, you have to learn how to accept things.” Well, accept the fact that you’re responsible for your actions. If you’re going to accept something, accept that. Accept the fact that your actions can change, your attitudes can change, your talents can change, your abilities can change. If you work on them, accept that. If the voice comes and says, “You’re being too hard on yourself,” check it to make sure whether it’s true or not. Question these voices. If the voice says, “You’ve chosen the wrong thing to focus on, you’ve got to focus on something else,” that can get you scattered all over the place. So unless you find that you have to work on A before you can deal with B, can you choose B as your focal point for your changing? If you find that A really is necessary in order to deal with B, then you focus on A. But otherwise, if it’s just some alternative issue that comes up, you say, “Look, I’ve got to focus on this one first.” Let those other issues go for the time being. You’ll get back to them later. The fourth quality is calm. In other words, have a patient attitude toward this. One of the reasons why the Buddha taught patience to Rahula before he taught him anything else in meditation is because you need this to underlie all your activities in working with the mind. When you’re working on concentration, you have to be patient. Whatever comes up in the mind, you don’t let yourself get blown away by it. You’re going to see things you don’t like about yourself, and oftentimes that’s hard. You learn how to recognize that you’ve got certain weaknesses that you didn’t like to admit to yourself before. Don’t be a good sport about it. We all have our weaknesses. This is part of being a human being. Learn how to have a good sense of humor around it as well. Recognize your foibles as foibles and say, “Oh, there’s that one again.” Don’t let them turn into monsters in your mind. As you find working with one particular issue that you get more and more competent with it, that gives you the confidence in yourself to see your other issues with that certain sense of humor and detachment. Humor is one of the best ways of separating yourself from your defilements. You see your greed in action and you can laugh at it. That’s a lot better than being scared by it and trying to pound it down. In the forest tradition, as John Lee and Ajahn Mahābhūla talk about dealing with enemies, when you knock them out, you try to convert them. See what there is in your unskillful quality that actually is looking for happiness. Try to understand it. Then you can convert it. You say, “Look, the real happiness doesn’t lie there. It lies someplace else.” As John Lee says, you have to be heedful, in this case, because a lot of the unskillful qualities have a lot of tricks. But if you can learn to be trickier than they are, that’s okay. And part of being tricky like this involves having a sense of humor that enables you to live with your foibles and not be overcome by them. You can live with them, but you’re separate from them. So even though you’re on the way to getting some results and haven’t quite gotten there yet, at least that fact doesn’t overwhelm you. It’s much better being on the way someplace and not having a direction at all, just kind of wandering all over the place, which is the way most people live and a lot of us have been living our lives. The whole point of determination is you give yourself some direction. Because the universe doesn’t point out a direction for you. It just keeps going around and around and around. As the Buddha said, it’s like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. But there’s no real rhyme or reason to it. It’s not going anywhere, which means that we’re free to focus on the big issue in our hearts, which is the suffering we’re causing ourselves. That way, the fact that things outside there don’t have any purpose or don’t have any meaning, that’s actually liberating. Because we can give meaning to our own lives by giving them direction. So one of the best ways of giving direction to your life is to realize there are things that can be changed, that need to be changed, if you want to be happy. And you’re going to focus on the work of changing them.

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