The Skill of Meditation

November 29, 2016

As we meditate, we’re working on a skill. And the skill is to bring the mind to a state of stillness with as much alertness and awareness as possible. Because this skill lies at the basis of all other skills. If you want to be skillful in how you act, how you speak, how you think, you need to be aware of what you’re doing. And you have to be in the present moment to watch your intentions. Because your intentions shape everything. And you want to be able to gauge the results of your intentions so that if you had what you thought was a good intention, and it turned out not to be good, you know. And then you can go back and make adjustments. So we have to work on the mind right now. So it is the kind of mind that can stay in the present moment to watch what’s going on and be there in time to make a difference. So you focus on the breath, because the breath is always in the present. There’s no past breath you can focus on, no future one. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re right here, right now. And to stay here requires that you have a sense of ease with the breath. So take some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process most prominently in the body. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can think of changing the rhythm. And the important word there being “think of it.” You don’t have to put any physical pressure on it to change the rhythm. Just think. What would shorter breathing be like? See how the body responds. Or in short, out long, in long, out short. Deeper, more shallow. Heavier, lighter. Faster, slower. Learn to read the results of your breathing on the body. And try to have a sense of the whole body breathing, because your entire nervous system is involved in the process. You don’t want to be tensing up in one spot in the body to focus exclusively on the breath in another spot. You want the whole body to feel at ease, the whole body to feel nourished by the breathing, because that enables you to stay in the present even more solidly, with a sense of well-being. Otherwise, if there’s no sense of well-being, you’re going to run away. And then you won’t be here. You’ll be here in the present moment, and that’s where your choices are being made. It’s like the mind is a factory, constantly churning out thoughts, ideas, plans, intentions, whatever. And if there’s no quality control, you just create a lot of bad goods out there on the market. So your being here in the present moment is your quality control. And as we work on this skill, it’s good to think about the qualities that go into developing a skill. The Buddha lists four. The very first one is desire. You have to want to do this. This is something that’s totally voluntary. Nobody’s forcing it on you. In fact, if other people force it on you, you can just hear and not do it. But you can think of good reasons for why you want to do it. That’ll give you the oomph you need to get past the first steps when it’s not going quite so well. There are lots of ways you can motivate yourself. The primary one the Buddha recommends is heedfulness, realizing that if you don’t get your act together, there’s going to be suffering. But your actions do make a difference. So paying careful attention to them and having this ability to be here in the present moment with as much awareness as possible is a good skill to have. Compassion is another way of motivating yourself. You realize that for your own good and for the good of the people around you, the less greed, aversion, and delusion take charge in your mind, the less you’re going to suffer, the less people around you are going to be harassed by your greed, aversion, and delusion. So it’s an act of kindness to get your act together. As you develop some skill, you can take pride in your practice, that you’re doing something honorable. You’re finding a happiness, a sense of well-being, that doesn’t cause any harm to anybody at all. It enables you to live in the world without putting too much of a weight on other people. Because severe happiness depends on things being a certain way, getting certain kinds of food, getting certain kinds of whatever. You’re out there struggling with other people. And you become a weak person. Things have to be just right for you to be happy. Whereas if you have this ability to find a sense of inner strength and inner well-being inside, things outside can be not quite perfect, and yet you’re okay. Then you can survive anywhere. Which means your goodness can survive anywhere, regardless of the circumstances outside. And that’s an honorable thing. So you think in various ways to motivate yourself to practice. And then you put in the effort. That’s the second quality of the Buddha list. And the effort here is not just sweating and straining. It’s the effort to notice that if an unskillful quality is coming up in the mind, you’re not going to let it stay. You do what you can to get rid of it. For instance, as you’re sitting here, there could be thoughts of sensual desire come up, ill will, sleepiness, restlessness, doubts about yourself, doubts about the practice. You have to clear those thoughts away because they’re going to get in the way of being here with a sense of clarity and stillness. So you have to see their drawbacks so that you’re not siding with them. The problem is, when sensual desire comes up, we tend to side with it, that the object of the desire really is something desirable. When ill will comes up, we can think of all sorts of reasons why the person we don’t like really does deserve to suffer. When sleepiness comes up, we’re very quick to interpret it as a sign that the body needs some rest. Or sometimes the mind is just playing a trick on you. This happens all too often in the meditation. Something really important is about to come up, but there’s a part of the mind that doesn’t want to deal with it, that’s afraid of it. So it makes you sleepy. You’ve got to resist that. Breathe in a way that’s more energizing. Or change to another meditation topic for a while that gives the mind more work to do. For instance, you can think about the parts of the body. What have you got right here? You go through all the different bones, all the different muscles, all the organs. Visualize them to yourself. Try to have a sense, if you’re thinking, say, about your liver. Where is your liver right now? Your intestines, where are they right now? Some people find this really calming, particularly as an antidote to lust, or pride around the body, or shame around the body. Because after all, the parts in your body are the same as the parts in everybody else’s body. There’s no contest as to who has the prettiest lungs or the prettiest kidneys. It’s kind of calming. Contemplation is a great equalizer. If you’re feeling restless and anxious about the future, you have to remind yourself that the future is very uncertain. But what is certain is that you’re going to need as much alertness and mindfulness and concentration and discernment as you can to deal with whatever comes up. And how do you gain those qualities? Well, being with the breath. There’s no reason to drop your worries, to fend off that part of the mind that feels, “If I worry enough, then the danger will go away, or at the very least I’ve done my duty.” No, you’ve weakened yourself. You want to develop strengths inside so that whatever comes up, you’ll be alert, mindful, clear about what’s happening, and much more likely to be able to see what should be done. At the same time, you’ll have the strength needed to do what should be done. So when you find things coming up that are getting in the way of the breath, you’ve got to clear them away. That’s the persistence. When you’re with the breath, you want to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, to notice if there are any unnecessary patterns of tension that you’re allowing to build up, say, as you breathe in. Notice that you’re leaving blocks of tension as you breathe out. In other words, you’re putting an effort into developing skillful qualities to replace the unskillful ones. This is not just a process of sitting here with whatever comes up in the present moment or opening things that will naturally unfold without any effort on your part. Effort is necessary. In fact, in Thailand, one of the nicknames they have for meditation is “making an effort.” And the phrase is constantly repeated. It’s through effort that suffering can be ended. So you don’t just sit there with whatever comes up in the mind. You divert things. In fact, this is one of the duties of mindfulness, to remember what’s skillful and what’s not, and to try to give rise to what’s skillful and what’s not. You’re not just sitting there watching things arise and pass away on their own. Some things you try to make arise, and then you try to prevent them from passing away—the skillful things. Other things you try to prevent from arising, or if they have arisen, you try to make them pass away really quickly—the unskillful things. This is all part of effort, which shades into the next quality, which is intent. You really do give your full attention to this. It requires both mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness, as I said, being the ability to remember what you should be doing, and alertness is noticing what you’re actually doing. We’re not in the present moment just to enjoy the present moment, and we’re not in the present moment just in a general way. We’re specifically here to focus on what we’re doing and the results we’re getting. That’s what alertness means. So give this your full attention. As for anything else that may come up, just put it aside, put it aside. Be as sensitive as you can to what’s going on in the mind. So if you detect anything unskillful, you can deal with it right away, not wait for it to build up. You want to be one hundred percent with the breath as you breathe in, one hundred percent with the breath as you breathe out, one hundred percent with your awareness here. The fourth quality is a term that’s hard to translate in Pali. It’s vimamsa. It basically means your discernment, your discrimination, your ingenuity, and your circumspection. All of those things at once. In other words, the active side of the mind is analyzing what’s going on and trying to figure things out. Specifically, when things are not going well, you figure out what’s the problem. Is the problem with the breath or is it with the mind? If it’s with the mind, what things can you think about that get you in the right mood? Again, go back and think about your reasons for being here. If the problem is with the breath, pay careful attention. Ask yourself this. What is the image I have in my mind of the breath? Is it helpful for the meditation or not? John Lee talks about the breath energy, not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the breath energy that flows in the nerves. He says you can imagine that entering the body at any spot. Where do you sense the energy coming in? And when it comes in, what kind of mechanics do you envision operating in the body? Does that image you have actually help make the breath easier, make it flow more smoothly, or does it get in the way? Try changing the way you think about the breath. Or ask yourself if the range of your awareness is full enough. Think whole body all the way from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. Think of the breath coming in and out of the body from all directions. You’re sitting here surrounded by breath. And your awareness fills the present moment. The more you can fill the present moment with your awareness, the more difficult it’s going to be to slip off to the past or the future. So these four qualities all come together—the desire, the persistence or effort, the intention, and your powers of analysis. So you can develop this skill of being here in the present moment with as much alertness as possible. You read the steps, but you realize that that last quality of using your mental faculties also requires ingenuity. Sometimes you read in a book about what should be happening and it’s not happening. So you have to ask yourself, “What’s going wrong? What can I change?” The books are there to give you some idea of what changes you might make. But if the things you read about don’t work, ask yourself, “Why can’t I be on good terms with my own breath? Why can’t I settle in? What’s the issue?” You have to experiment. And it’s in the experimenting that the skill of meditation actually becomes your skill. It’s not just something you read about or you’re trying to force yourself into a particular mold. It becomes your relationship to yourself in the present moment, your relationship to your awareness in the present moment, your relationship to your own body in the present moment, using the tools of the meditation. And in particular, you get to see more and more precisely when an intention comes up and the inner conversation that goes around that intention. And you can insert some skillful new voices into that conversation. Because we’re looking for freedom here. That’s what the skill is ultimately for. Skillfulness in all of our activities is there to make us more sensitive to the fact that we are making choices in the present moment. We have some freedom of choice. The more you pay attention to this possibility, the more freedom you find. If you don’t pay attention, everything goes on automatic pilot. And you don’t know who’s responsible for what. You can do things and people ask you, “Why did you do that?” And you can say, “Well, I don’t really know.” But if you’re more carefully attentive to your choices in the present moment, you begin to see that you do have choices. There is some freedom here. And the more you explore that freedom by being skillful, the more you discover there’s something else, another kind of freedom that’s not conditioned. The freedom of choice is something conditioned, but there is an unconditioned freedom. It’s to be touched. And it’s right next to that freedom of choice. So pay careful attention here. Because what you’re doing here in the present moment, right when the body and the mind meet at the breath, that shapes your whole life. And it determines the opportunities, the openings that can come. As you’re looking for ways in which to stop causing unnecessary suffering and develop the level of skill to the greatest extent that you can. Because that sensitizes you to what’s actually going on here and your sense of the possibilities of what can be done right here, will grow.

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