Look for the Long-term

August 29, 2017

There are so many things in life that we can’t control. The weather is one of them. Rain is dumping in Texas right now. We’re having a heat wave. But our lack of control over the weather is nothing compared to the dangers of not being able to control our minds. This is why we meditate, to gain some measure of control over our thoughts, because our thoughts can lead us to do all kinds of unskillful things, create all kinds of suffering, if we’re not careful. But if we train the mind to get more under our control, then the mind can do us a lot of good. Like animals that we train. If we don’t train them and have them in the house, they just create a lot of mess. But if we train them, they’re useful for us. So here we are, surrounded by nature right now, out in the field, very similar to the place where the Buddha was. On the night of his awakening, alone under a tree, he could focus all of his attention on his mind, because he had seen, as he gained the various knowledges on that night, the power of the mind to create all kinds of things. But then all of the mind’s creations would turn on it. Is there some way, he said, to train the mind so that it doesn’t cause itself suffering? To answer that question, he put his mind into concentration. He focused on his breath, which is very similar to the breath you’ve got right now. Breath going in, breath going out, this is something we all have as part of our experience of being a body. And he used that as his topper for concentration, something that’s always there. And he’s later taught that you can get in touch with the breath and find ways to make it comfortable. In his later instructions, he talked about making the breath long, making it short. That’s just the beginning of all kinds of things you can do. You can make the breath deep, you can make it shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. And just this simple process, one of the most basic processes in the body, you begin to find that it has a lot of potential. There are ways of breathing that can fill the whole body with a sense of ease and well-being, a well-being that doesn’t have to depend on anything outside. It’s a very valuable skill. Try to get in touch with how your body feels from within, from the head all the way down to the toes. You’re surrounded by skin. And if you pay careful attention to how the breathing feels, you’re in this area of your awareness. You notice that the breath is not just something that comes in and out the nose. There’s a feeling of energy that flows through the body that allows the air to come in and out to begin with. And then there are deeper layers, more subtle layers of energy as well. But you have to pay careful attention. The more you can make your mind quiet just to be right here, the more you’re going to see. So these two things go together, quiet and seeing. If you’re not quiet, there’s an awful lot you miss. Because after all, the mind is what shapes your life. It’s your desires that impel you. As the Buddha said, “Everything you experience is rooted in desire.” You see because you want to see. You hear because you want to hear. You go after things because you want them. As the Jhana Mahaprabhu once said, “The only kind of person who has no wants is a dead person.” We’ve got all these wants going on in the mind. The question is, which ones should we listen to and which ones not? If we have desires but then they cause us suffering, what kind of desire is that? Is it something you should really listen to? Is it something you should really follow? It may give you short-term happiness, short-term pleasure. But what about the long-term consequences? This is why the Buddha said that we’re a slave to craving. Craving pushes us, and for the most part we don’t really look where it’s pushing us. We just go along with the push. If you want to see that and you want to see the impact it’s having on the mind, you have to get very, very quiet. Because of all the things in the world, this is the most interesting thing. This is the most important thing to see. How the mind is being pushed around by its desires and how it can change its desires to be good desires. You can train your desires as well. It’s all too often thought that the Buddha said desire is bad. But that’s not the case. Right effort, as we chanted just now, chandang janeti, generating desire. It’s part of the path. But it’s the desire to be skillful and the desire to abandon unskillful things. Those are the desires you want to encourage. Those are the desires that, instead of enslaving you, liberate you. So it’s not that desire is bad. It’s simply that we listen to the wrong desires. Whatever seems most pressing, we go with it. Whatever captures our attention, we go with it. We don’t stop to look and see, “Where is this going to go in the long term?” That’s the beginning of wisdom, to ask that question, “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term harm and suffering?” You’ve got to think long-term. And for the mind to think long-term, it needs to be fed. Because all it needs, all it thinks it needs, is short-term pleasures. Now that pleasures are so easy to gain, you get what you want right on that screen. People forget long-term. But then they have to live with the consequences. They wonder why they’re unhappy. They wonder why their minds are frazzled. It’s because they keep going for short-term, short-term pleasure. The quick fix, the quick pleasure. And they forget about the long-term happiness that comes from developing skills in how you deal with your mind, how you deal with your thoughts and your words and your deeds. So if we want to find happiness, we have to take the long view. The happiness that lasts requires skills that last. Skills that take the long term into consideration. If you want happiness that lasts, you find something to be with that’s going to be there with you all the time. The breath is one of those things. As long as you’re alive, there’s going to be the breath. So learn to be with it. Learn to find pleasure here. It’s there, if you look at it, if you look for it. In the beginning, it may not seem like it’s much, but then think about trees. When trees get started, they don’t look like big trees. They’re little tiny seeds. And it’s when you take the long-term view that you begin to water them. So you can get the trees you want. It may take decades sometimes for the trees to get really big, but when then you have them, you can depend on their shade, you can depend on their fruits, you can depend on their flowers. Things that wouldn’t have existed if you hadn’t taken the long-term view. So take some time to put aside your pleasures for right now. And see if you can get on good terms with the breath inside the body. Find out what it has to offer. You get the mind quiet and watch. You begin to see that different ways of breathing have different impacts on the body, different impacts on the mind. When you’re feeling tense, when you’re feeling irritable, you can breathe in a way that soothes it down. When you’re feeling tired, you can breathe in a way that gives you energy. You can breathe in a way that you can pay money to get drugs for. And then drugs have bad side effects. But this has no bad side effects. After all, the breath is your force of life. That’s why you’re here right now, the fact that the body’s breathing. So if you take some time and look into it, you’ll find that it will give you long-term benefits. It’ll be a friend you can trust. And like the people out there in the world, it doesn’t want to be a friend. It doesn’t want anything from you. All it wants is a little attention. And it will repay you many times over.

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