Timeless Practice

September 6, 2017

Focus on your breath. Start with a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths to ventilate the body. Notice where you feel the breathing process. You know that there’s air coming in and out through the nose, but there’s also a flow of energy in the body, or many flows of energy in the body that accompany the breath. And those are what you really want to focus on. The air coming in and out, that’s the result of the flow of the energy. And you want that flow to be good, to feel good deep down inside. Because the better it feels, the easier it’ll be to stay with it. And as I was saying this afternoon, you can either experiment with different kinds of breathing, or simply pose that question in the mind each time you breathe in. What kind of breathing would feel good now? Which part of the body has a need for good breath energy? Feed that part. Think of the energy going there. As for any other thoughts that may come into the mind, just let them go. You don’t have to get involved with them. Just be choicelessly aware of whatever comes up. You have made choices, and you want to stick with that choice. You’re going to stay here with the breath. This is how you train the mind. We’re here because we see that our minds are suffering because of a lack of training. The mind is causing itself the suffering that it’s weighing itself down. And there are causes for suffering that may seem to come from outside. But it’s because we use them in the wrong way that we inflict ourselves with that suffering. So we’ve got to train the mind to stop doing that. Concentration is one of the main tools you’re going to need. The Buddha compares it to food that keeps you sustained on the path, as part of a larger path. Of course, right concentration is part of the eightfold path. And even the eightfold path fits into a larger context of the fact that you’re living a whole life. You can’t spend all your time sitting here with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. The other things you do as you go through the day. The precepts cover some of the things you might be tempted to do. But there’s a lot that’s not covered in the precepts. And there’s a whole range of them that falls under the category of generosity. One of the larger frameworks is the framework of the perfections, which helps give you an idea of what Dhamma practice means in your life as a whole. And part of it, of course, is seeing your whole life as an opportunity to practice. The way you speak, the way you talk to other people, the way you talk to yourself, the way you act with other people. All this is part of the practice. And Chan Fung used to say that our problem is that we tend to divide the day up into times. There’s a time to eat, and then there’s a time to clean up, and then there’s a time to do a little meditation, and then there’s a time to talk with friends, and time for this and time for that. It gets cut up into little tiny times, and you can end up with very little time to practice. But if you can tell yourself that whatever I’m going to do, one, I want to have a good, solid grounding to be in the present moment as much as possible. This is what the breath provides. And then whatever else comes up, I’m going to see it as an opportunity to practice, to develop equanimity, to develop endurance, to develop determination. That’s how the practice becomes timeless. Because after all, we’re looking for a goal that’s timeless. So instead of chopping the day up into little times, you make it one big time to practice. The practice becomes timeless, and it develops all kinds of dimensions. I think of how practicing mindfulness is good not only for you, but also for the people around you. He calls that protecting others as you protect yourself. But then there’s also protecting yourself as you protect others. Learning how to develop qualities of goodwill, equanimity, endurance, kindness towards others, and enduring the times when they’re difficult. And going out of your way to be kind and sympathetic. He says in this way you benefit. It looks like you’re helping them, but you’re gaining the benefits of these good qualities that then will help you in the practice. Endurance is a big one, because you need it both for formal meditation practice and just to live in this world. There are going to be pains that we have to endure. There are going to be unkind, harsh, unkind untrue words that we have to endure. This is part of human life. We probably didn’t check the fine print on the contract when we signed on to being born here, but that’s what’s there. So if you learn how to endure pain on a daily level, and you learn how to endure pain during the meditation, those two types of endurance help each other. If you learn how to endure harsh words, by depersonalizing them. Someone says something really nasty to you, just tell yourself, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” Let it stop at the ear. Don’t bring it in and create all kinds of stories around it. If you can do that, you’re not only making it easier for yourself to endure harsh words, you’re developing a lot of discernment. You’re beginning to see how much the mind actually takes things that are maybe a little bit unpleasant and can make a huge pile of suffering out of them, totally, needlessly. But if you can learn how to see that process by trying to stop it at the source, you gain a lot of insight into the mind. So this is one way in which endurance of outside issues can become a really important part of understanding your own mind. And so the practice of just living with other people can be a source of real insight. Because what kind of insight are we looking for here? It’s the insight where you see, “What am I doing that’s causing unnecessary suffering? And what can I do that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?” How can I change my habits? What am I doing that’s wrong? What can I do in order to bring some more knowledge to what I’m doing so I can actually use my mind, which has all kinds of potentials, and instead of using it just to create more suffering, learn how to create some happiness? Insight isn’t just seeing that things are impermanent or stressful or whatever. The real insight comes from taking seriously your desire to be truly happy, and then looking at your thoughts and words and deeds and seeing where they contribute to true happiness and where they don’t. And if you find yourself latching onto something that’s inconstant and is harmful, you can remind yourself that this is not necessary. Or use the perception of something being inconstant and stressful to pull yourself away from distractions, things that weigh the mind down, that would pull you out of concentration, that would pull you away from the precepts. That’s where that insight or that perception is useful. But it’s always in the context of taking seriously, honoring, your desire for true happiness. And you want to be able to live your life so that it honors that desire. So we’re not just after pleasures here. We’re after something deeper and more lasting. And that will require powers of determination, powers of endurance, truthfulness, virtue, all the perfections that are kind of like the Capricorn virtues, the ones that require work and time, but get you to where you want to go. So remember, the practice is not a sprint, it’s not a hundred-yard dash, it’s a marathon. And you have to learn how to pace yourself, realizing that you’re in this for the long haul. And that it’s not just a matter of sitting here with your eyes closed and developing the techniques of concentration or mindfulness. It’s a whole training of the whole mind. And it can take your whole life, both in the sense of feeling your life from now until the time you pass away, but also every aspect of your life. As you deal with other people, there’s dharma in dealing with other people. There are perfections to be developed as you’re working. There are perfections to be developed as you’re dealing with issues at home. Whatever the activity, there are some perfections that can be developed. And that’s how you turn your life into practice. It’s not simply a matter of trying to be mindful as you go through the day. It’s asking yourself, “What qualities of mind do I need that will provide a good, solid foundation in this quest for true happiness?” A happiness that doesn’t let you down, a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. And that way, your practice becomes timeless. It’s not a matter of a person living in the 21st century. It becomes a person looking for true happiness. A person taking control of his or her mind. A person that stops creating suffering and can actually find something of real substance inside. And that way, your practice begins to take on the contours not just of you right now, but of all people who’ve practiced the Dhamma. That’s part of what the Buddha calls the noble search. The search for something that doesn’t die, that lies outside of time. But you find it by going moment to moment to moment, trying to make the day a day that is a day of timeless practice, where everything you do becomes part of training the mind. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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