Emptiness

June 4, 2023

You have to remember when you’re meditating to watch what you’re doing. It’s not that you’re simply on the receiving end of things coming at you. You’re playing an active role in shaping what you’re going to do and say and think. And so you want to be very careful about what you do and say and think. The Buddha says you start out meditating by establishing mindfulness to the fore. What that means is that you try to remember why you’re here, what you want to do. And you can’t try to keep on remembering that for the whole session. Then you’re alert, watching what you’re actually doing, the results you’re getting. And then you’re ardent. If it turns out you’re not doing what you were supposed to be doing, you go back to your original intention. If you are doing what you’re supposed to be doing, try to do it with sensitivity. Because we’re here trying to gain a sense of well-being inside. And the more sensitive you are to how you breathe, how you focus, the more you can fine-tune the breath and your focus. So that it feels good being right here, right now. This principle of being sensitive to what you’re doing is really basic to the Dharma. When the Buddha was teaching his seven-year-old son, first lesson in the Dharma was to be truthful. And the second lesson was learning how to be observant of his own actions. He said before you do something, ask yourself what results do you expect? From this action? And if you expect any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t expect any harm, you can go ahead and do it. Then while you’re doing it, watch to see what results you’re getting right in the immediate present. Because there are cases where your actions give results immediately. You don’t have to wait for the next lifetime. You stick your finger in a fire, it’s not going to wait until the next lifetime for it to burn, to hurt. It hurts right away. Or if you can focus on the breath in a way that feels uncomfortable, it’s going to be uncomfortable right away. So if the results come out not what you want, if you find you’re harming yourself, harming other people, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you can continue. When the action is done, then you look at the long-term consequences. And if it turned out that you actually did harm somebody, either yourself or somebody else, even though you didn’t expect it, make a mental note of that. Talk it over with someone else who’s more advanced on the path to get some good ideas about how to avoid that mistake. And then make up your mind that you’re not going to make that mistake again. When the Buddha was teaching this principle to his son, it wasn’t the sort of Dharma that you teach only to children and then you forget as you get older. He meant to get his son Rahula focused on the big issue right from the very beginning. Which is that your actions do have consequences. You are shaping your experience. So you want to be careful about how you do it. Do it in a way that’s harmless. And the same principle carries over to the mind. One more thing though. If it turns out that you did something and there was no harm, then the Buddha says take joy in that fact. Be happy that you’re progressing in your training and then continue training. To higher and higher levels. When you come to meditate, the same principles apply. You try to get the mind to settle down. And then you look at the results you’re getting. And if it turns out that the mind is disturbing itself, ask yourself, “Why am I creating this disturbance?” All too often we blame the disturbances on things outside, noises outside. Or memories that came up. Thoughts that come up into the mind. Some people even say when they sit down to meditate, all they can see is how their mind is wandering around. Which means that they say that they can’t meditate. But that’s like saying, “I’m sick, but I’m too sick to go to the hospital.” If you’re sick, you go to the hospital. You go see the doctor. Get the medicine you need. So the fact that there’s disturbance in the mind, this is normal, but it’s what we want to deal with. Ask yourself, “Why am I getting involved in that disturbance?” In the beginning, when you come out to a place like this, it’s good to appreciate the fact that the mind is less disturbed from outside and from inside. You stay here long enough and the world out there seems far, far away. And the concerns of the world seem far away. Learn how to appreciate that in the same way that when you’ve done something skillful, you learn how to appreciate the fact that you’re getting more skillful. Here you’re appreciating the lack of disturbance. The mind is empty of things that used to fill it up. But there’s still the disturbance that the mind hasn’t settled down fully in the present moment. So you’re trying to focus it on something that feels really good in the present moment, like the breath. You can make the breath long, short, fast, slow. See what kind of breathing feels right right now. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it as long as it feels good. But make sure it doesn’t become mechanical. Because you do want to maintain your sensitivity all the time. Because as the mind settles down, the needs of the body are going to change. So take note of that fact. Make adjustments as you have to. And then as the mind settles down even more, learn how to appreciate, well, now the mind has begun to settle down. The thoughts are coming fewer and farther between. And that way you can see that the mind is empty of those things that used to fill it up. But there’s still some disturbance. As the Buddha said, when you settle down, first you have to talk to yourself about your meditation object, like the breath. Ask yourself, does the breath feel good? Does it not feel good? If it doesn’t feel good, what can I do to change it? If it does feel good, how can I maintain that good feeling? What can I do to get the best use out of it? Well, you let it spread through the body to hear you’re talking to yourself. So there’s some lack of quiet there. But this talking to yourself is a necessary part of getting the mind to settle down. It’s like fixing your bed. You check to make sure there are no lumps and no other objects inside the bed that were going to disturb you if you lie down. And then the mind can stop talking to itself and just be with the breath, coming in, going out, with a sense of being one with the breath. And as the Buddha said, this will give rise to a sense of pleasure. And then a term that in Pali is bhitti, which can be translated as rapture or refreshment or fullness. That can come too. We’ll allow that to spread through the body as well. But then after a while the movements of the rapture and refreshment get a little bit too intense. And you say, I’d like something more calm. So you tune into a level of energy that’s calmer. And the manifestations of rapture calm down. The mind is even less disturbed. It’s empty of the rapture. And it feels lighter, freer, less disturbed. And so you learned how to appreciate that. And as you go through the different levels of concentration, in each case you realize that the disturbance that remains after you’ve cleared the decks in the very beginning, the disturbances come from within. They’re part of what you’re doing to get the mind to settle down. It’s like a child learning to walk. In the beginning the child is not too clear on which muscles are necessary, which ones are not. So the child will use more of its body than it has to. It’s not very efficient in how it walks. But after a while it gets a sense of which ones are necessary, which ones are not. It gets more and more efficient. Then it can run around, do all kinds of things, with a lot more grace. It’s the same with meditation. As you’re settling in, there are certain activities you need to do to get the mind to settle in. But once it’s settled in, you can drop them. Then you want to learn how to appreciate the fact that once you’ve dropped them, the mind feels lighter, feels more open, more relieved. This is one of the meanings of emptiness in the Buddhist teachings. The mind isn’t disturbing itself. And as you get into more subtle levels of concentration, you begin to work on your discernment. And you begin to realize that another way the mind disturbs itself, even in the concentration, is that if it has a sense of “this is me, this is mine.” But the mind doesn’t have to think those thoughts. It doesn’t have to tell you, you don’t have to tell yourself there’s nobody there. But simply it’s not an issue. You can drop that issue. The mind feels even more empty of disturbance when you see that it’s what’s coming up in the mind is empty of self. So those are the two meanings of emptiness in the Buddhist teachings. Empty of disturbance, empty of self. The mind is more empty like this, and it’s wider, more open, more spacious, with a lighter sense of well-being. But it all starts from that basic principle. Look at what you’re doing. And if you’re doing something that’s causing either harm, or in the case of the meditation, it’s hard to say you’re harming yourself, but you’re still disturbing yourself. You learn how to stop what you’re doing that’s causing that harm, or causing that disturbance. This is how your practice progresses. It’s the same as you develop discernment. You see you’re holding on to things that you don’t have to hold on to, and you’re weighing the mind down. When you let go, things get more light, easier. But the basic principle holds the same all the way through. Look at what you’re doing. That’s one spot where the Buddha says that this is how you nourish the Dharma, by committing yourself to doing it, and then reflecting on what you’re doing, to see how you could do it better. Less harm, less disturbance. Ultimately you get to the point where the mind isn’t disturbing itself with any greed, any aversion, any delusion at all. That’s the ultimate emptiness. That’s the emptiness the Buddha said that he dwelt in. We’re working our way there by being careful to notice what we’re doing. So many people make a mistake when they meditate. A state comes on which is very peaceful, and they don’t reflect on what they’re doing to create that peaceful state, and they think that maybe they’ve gained awakening. Maybe they’ve reached the ground of being. But you reflect on the fact that to get the mind to settle down like that, you had to do certain things. So it’s still the result of your actions. So keep looking at your actions to see where you’re causing unnecessary disturbance. Let it go. Stop. That’s what it means to let go. It’s just stop doing something you’ve been doing over and over again. We can be able to approach the emptiness that the Buddha was enjoying. The mind totally empty of burdens, empty of disturbance. Sounds may come, but the sounds don’t disturb the mind. Even as the body gets sick, gets old, and begins to die, the pains in the body don’t reach into the mind, because the mind is not taking the mind. This is how you maintain that emptiness and keep your mind free.

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