Meditating with Not-Self

April 28, 2024

Close your eyes. Take a couple of good, deep, long, in-and-out breaths. And notice where you feel the breathing. It could be anywhere in the body. And here, by feeling the breath, we’re talking about the movement of the body, more than the movement of the air through the nostrils. Where the chest rises, the abdomen expands. That’s the breath we’re focusing on. And ask yourself if long breathing feels good. If it does, you keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. You can try faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels right now. And you get to choose what kind of breathing you like. This is an important principle when you practice concentration. You’ve got to give the mind something that it likes being with. And if you’re going to be with the breath, the breath has the advantage that you can change it in all kinds of ways to make it comfortable. Soothing when you’re feeling tense. Energizing when you’re feeling tired. You’ll find that the breath responds very quickly to the directions you give to it. And notice you are playing an important role here. You get to make the choices. You get to judge the results. You’re taking responsibility for your mind right now. That’s an important principle in the Buddhist teachings. It says we suffer because we don’t really pay careful attention to what we’re doing. We end up doing a lot of unskillful things even though we want to act in ways that lead to happiness. We often find that our actions lead to the opposite of happiness. And that’s because we’re not paying full attention to what we’re doing and to the results. So you have to take responsibility. Now you may have heard of the Buddhist teachings on not-self. Sometimes they present it as a teaching on no-self. But the Buddha himself never taught that way. He taught that we create a sense of self. A process he calls “I-making” and “my-making.” In other words, you identify with certain things as either you or yours. And it’s a choice you make. And you do it strategically. Because you want to have a sense of you as the person responsible for your actions. And you as the person who’s going to be benefiting from your actions. In other words, somebody asking you to be more careful and observant about how you create this sense of “me” or “mine.” And learn how to do it more strategically. So it leads you to do actions that really are in your true best interest and are totally harmless. That’s one of the basic principles then when you look for your true happiness. It’s not a zero-sum game. In other words, that’s not the case that you get more happiness, other people have to get less. If you’re really wise, the way you look for happiness is also conducive to the happiness of others. You don’t break the precepts. Other people are not going to suffer because of the kind of actions that would break the precepts. And they also get you as a good example. If you can show them that it’s through being moral and getting some control over your mind that happiness is found, that’s going to be a good example for them. That may inspire them to look inside for their happiness too. As for any thoughts in your mind that would go against the practice, that would make you break the precepts, destroy your concentration, you can say no to them. You don’t have to identify with them. You may have identified with them in the past. This is where the teaching on not-self comes in. You look at them and you realize they’re not worth it. You don’t have to identify with them. Nothing forces you. The simple fact that something is arising in your mind doesn’t mean you have to take it on and run with it. You can let it go. It’s in this way that you learn how to create less and less suffering for yourself. When the Buddha taught in the very beginning, he taught that we suffer because we cling to our body, we cling to mental events like feelings and perceptions and thought constructs, even the act of consciousness. That’s the clinging. And eventually to get past that suffering we’re going to have to let go of all those things. But before we let go, we have to learn how to create something good out of those things. So we create a state of concentration, identify with the meditator who’s doing this, and dissipate, identify with any of the thoughts that would pull you away. That’s using your concepts of self and not-self strategically, in a wise way. We’re already using them strategically, we’re just learning how to be more observant, more discerning in how we do it. Now as the Buddha teaches, when concentration gets really solid, you can use that concentration as a basis for looking deeper into your mind, to see why it is that you do cling to these kinds of things. You find that there are certain cravings that make you want to do that. But when you look at what those cravings lead to, look more carefully, you see that it’s not worth it. You learn how to begin to let go of all kinds of things, not only things that would pull you off the path, but you begin to realize that the path itself is something constructed. You should let go of that too. Now the Buddha doesn’t have you totally let go until you’ve developed it. So use your concept of self, your sense of self, as being responsible, as being observant, as really benefiting from this. Use that to build the path, maintain the path inside. But then when the path is complete, and it’s ready to deliver you to something beyond it, that’s when you have to let go of everything. So you turn around and you look at the concentration itself, and you see, yes, there’s still some clinging here, there’s still some tension here. And we have the Buddhist teachings to remind us that when you can let go of everything like this, it’s not going to be a wipe-out, you’re not going to be left with nothing. There’s something much better that appears. So you’re more inclined to be willing to let go. So that’s how you use the concept of not-self. That’s how you meditate with not-self. Some people talk about meditating on not-self. It’s more a question of using the concept, and then putting the concept down. The Buddha’s image, or one of his images for the awakened mind, is a butcher. It’s not a pretty image, but it’s a very effective and memorable one. The butcher is going to take the skin off of a dead cow. He uses a knife to cut all the little connective tissues, so the skin is totally off the cow. And then he puts the skin back on. The question is, is it still connected as it was before? The answer is no. Even though it’s in contact, all the connections are gone. The greed, aversion, delusion, all your unskillful mental states. And the knife that separated them is the knife of discernment. And it’s your discernment that uses concepts of self and not-self appropriately. And even though you put the skin back on, there is a sense of being dissociated. You see sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations again. But there’s not the same sense of connection, because you’re no longer feeding on these things. As for the knife, you put the knife down. In other words, concepts of self and not-self at that point are not necessary. So this is how to understand the teaching on not-self. It is a strategy. It is a tool for us to help separate you from the things that are unskillful, and then to separate you from anything that’s constructed skillful or unskillful. And as the Jhans like to say, it’s like making a chair. You have a saw, you have a hammer, you have nails, all kinds of tools. As long as you’re working on the chair, you know to pick up the tools, but you don’t pick them up all at the same time. You pick up the different tools that are necessary, and you put them back down. And then when the chair is done, then you can put the tools away. It’s the same with the practice. There are times when you use the concept of self, times when you use the concept of not-self. As you see it’s appropriate, because you’re using them strategically. Each of them is a value judgment. The question is what is worth holding on to, what is not worth holding on to, what is worth identifying with, what is not. And that’s going to change as you progress in the path. But when the path has done its work, then you can put all the tools down and enjoy the results. Because the results as the Buddha said, are truly happy. They’re happiness that doesn’t depend on conditions, so it’s not going to change on you. And it doesn’t depend on harming anybody in any way at all. So when you stop and think about that, that’s the kind of happiness you want. Something that’s totally harmless, totally reliable, totally safe. That’s the goal we’re aiming at. And as the Chan Suet used to say, once you’ve reached the goal, the happiness is so complete, that the question of is there a self observing this, or is there no self observing this, that holds no interest. Because the happiness itself is totally absorbing. That’s where this practice is aimed.

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