The Middle Way

July 4, 2024

We chanted the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path just now, and it’s important that you understand how they come together. They’re not just eight random things. Right view is seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths, and the main point of the Four Noble Truths is that the cause of suffering is inside, and the suffering itself is something you’re doing. Clinging aggregates are not just things sitting around. The compound means the act of clinging to the aggregates, and it’s related to craving, which is the origination, which also comes from the mind. And that both the craving and the act of clinging are defined as passion and desire. The difference is that with craving, the word for craving in Pali, tanha, can also mean thirst. The word for clinging, upadana, means the act of feeding. So you’re thirsting for something and you’re looking for something to feed on, and you find that you latch on. So the craving is still there in the clinging aggregates. After all, while you’re feeding, it’s a sign that you’re still hungry. If you were totally satisfied, you’d stop. So the main point here is that if you’re going to put an end to the cause of suffering, you’ve got to look inside. This is why we meditate looking inside. When we make up our resolve that we’re not going to engage in unskillful qualities, unskillful states of mind, we’re just trying to figure out which ones are skillful and which ones are not. That’s basically right resolve. The Buddha lists the unskillful qualities as sensuality, ill will, harmfulness. A lot of people can see easily how ill will and harmfulness would be bad things to resolve. Sensuality, though, is a little more difficult. Time and time again people say, “Well, yes, but what is defining sensuality?” Not as sensual pleasures, but as our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, our plans for getting sensual pleasures. There’s a passion there. So the Buddha’s saying, basically, you should try to renounce that kind of thinking. But it’s not going to starve you of pleasure. This is another reason why we meditate the way we do. Yes, you give rise to a sense of well-being. It starts you out with the right effort, which carries over from right resolve. Anything unskillful coming up in the mind, you’re going to let it go. As for skillful things that are not there yet, you try to give rise to them and then you try to develop them. And the instructions for how you do that are in right mindfulness. You focus on the body in and of itself. You’re ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s the definition. How it works out in practice is you focus on the breath without any reference to anything else outside, just what it feels like to be breathing right now. If outside would pull you away to something else, you say, not now. This is not the time. And you bring three qualities to this. Ardency is the desire to do this well. Alertness is watching what you’re actually doing, both watching the breath and watching the mind. And then mindfulness is remembering. When you see something unskillful coming up, what do you do with it? This refers back to your right view. And right resolve. If unskillful qualities come up, things that would pull you away to thoughts about the world, you learn to let them go. Things that’ll get you more firmly planted in the breath, you develop them. When you do that properly, you rise to a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. That’s when you’re getting into right concentration. When the Buddha describes mindfulness of breathing, which is one of the ways of applying the principles of right mindfulness, very early on he says you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, you breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. When he talks about breathing, he’s not talking about the air coming in out through the nose, or the touch of the air at the nose. He’s talking about a quality with in the body itself, the flow of energy. So sit here and make a survey of your body. Where do you feel the energy as the breath comes in, as the breath goes out? Where is the movement most obvious? And also, what parts of the body are most sensitive to that movement? They’re usually areas around the heart, or around the throat, or in the stomach. That’ll tell you. Now the breath is too short, now the breath is too long. And what kind of breathing would feel good? What kind of breathing would feel satisfying? You’ve got to decide. And you’re free to decide. You can decide what you like right now, but then you’ve got to test it. Does it feel good over the long term? You can try long breathing, and it may feel good for a while, and then it feels excessive. Okay, if it feels excessive, you can make it shorter. Or if it feels too short, you feel like you’re not getting full measure of breath energy that you could, well, you can make it longer. Make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. And Chan-li adds that. You might want to breathe in long and out short, or in short and out long. And try to be really sensitive to how the breathing feels. All too often we desensitize ourselves because we have other, what we think are more important things to pay attention to. So you don’t want to be bothered with breath issues. So the breath gets pushed into the background. We get less and less familiar with it. This is the time to get more familiar, because you’re going to be settling down right here. So you want something good to settle down, with. And as I said, when the Buddha says to avoid the pleasures that come with thinking about sensual thoughts, he’s not starving you. He says breathe in a way that feels good. This is one of his main discoveries in his quest for awakening. You probably know the story. After living a life of lots of sensual pleasures, he ended up going to the other extreme and denying himself of all pleasures, to the point where he was going to die. He realized that was not the path. Then the question arose, could there be another way? He had tried both extremes. What way would lay in the middle? He remembered a time when he was young and he had spontaneously ended in a strong state of concentration while sitting under a tree. The question arose in his mind, could that be the path? And the answer came, yes. Why am I afraid of that pleasure that comes with that state of concentration? There’s nothing unskillful about it. It doesn’t intoxicate you. In fact, it actually helps you to see your mind more clearly. And at the same time, it doesn’t harm anybody at all. So that was the first factor of the path that he discovered. And it’s a central one. The passage where he calls all the other factors of the path the prerequisites for right concentration. So everything else is meant to support this. So take some time to get sensitive to what feels really good. And if you’re not sure, just keep experimenting. And ask yourself which parts of the body feel like they’re being shaped. Shut off from the breath, allow them to be participants as well. So you get a sense that the whole nervous system is involved. All the blood vessels, everything out to every pore. So if there’s any sense of tension or tightness or blockage in the body, allow it to relax. Then you find that areas of the body that you were sensitized to in the past begin to open up. Now there may be some parts of the body that resist. Some parts that are especially sensitive. And you find that they’re usually related to some psychological issue that you’re very sensitive to. So don’t push them too hard. Work around them. And show them that they can trust you. You’re here not to push things around. You’re here to listen to what the body needs. Because with our emotions we do tend to push the breath energy around a lot, subconsciously. Fear makes it get pushed in one direction. Anger gets it pushed in another direction. Jealousy in another direction. And so there are parts of the body that just kind of clam up. They don’t want to be pushed around. So now you’re going to be opening things up. You’re not going to push anything. We talk about the breath going down the spine, the breath going out the legs. You don’t push it down the spine. You don’t push it out the legs. You just think of whatever tension or tightness may be blocking the spine or the legs, opening up. And the breath will flow on its own without you having to push it. It’s the same as when you cut a road through a wilderness. Once the road is there, you don’t have to push the cars down the road. The cars or the people who want to go down the road, they’ll go on their own. All you do is make sure that the road is in good shape. There are no roadblocks. There are no avalanches. So traffic can flow smoothly. And this way you find the pleasure of the middle way. Sometimes the descriptions of the middle way sound like you’re avoiding pain on the one hand and pleasure on the other hand. So you’re trying to develop a neutral state in the middle. But again, remember, what is that middle way? The heart of the middle way is right concentration. And the factors of right concentration start with a sense of fullness, rapture, pleasure. They’re meant to feed your need. To have a sense of well-being for you to settle down here. So the well-being will depend on you getting sensitive to areas you’ve been desensitized to before. Releasing tension where you’ve been holding tension before. And getting a sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. You may want to hold in mind the perception that every cell in the body is breathing. They’re all breathing together. And you just hear watching over them. Feeling them from the inside. Allowing your awareness to spread through the whole body. With a sense of being connected, a sense of being in harmony. And then when you do that, that’s going to help your right views again. Because your understanding of where there’s craving, where there’s clinging, will get more and more refined as your sensitivities get more refined. So all the elements of the path come together right here. So try to sensitize yourself to right here. And allow things to open up.

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