Basic Mindfulness

July 7, 2024

Our minds are active. It’s not the case that they’re sitting there doing nothing and then something comes along and incites them to greed, aversion, delusion. Sometimes they’re out looking for things to get greedy about, things to get angry about, things to get deluded about. And they can find almost anything to be an object of greed or an object of anger. In the Buddha’s analysis he calls this intention and sometimes he uses the word fabrication to mean intention. In his analysis of suffering is that we start out by fabricating or making intentions in ignorance. We don’t know what we’re doing or maybe have a vague idea, but we’re not really clear on the fact that some of the things we do are actually causing suffering. Even the way we breathe, we breathe in ignorance and it can lead to suffering. We talk to ourselves in ignorance, not caring to notice how much suffering we’re causing her. Not really suffering but just disturbance, stress. And also by the perceptions we hold in mind, the feelings we focus on. These have an intentional element too and it’s done with ignorance. And when it’s done with ignorance it’s going to lead to stress. Now the solution is not just to stop, because how are we going to stop these things unless we really know them? So the path begins by learning to do these things in full awareness, really knowing what we’re doing, like breathing. This is why the Buddha’s most frequent meditation instructions were with breath meditation. You want to really know what it’s like to breathe. For him the breath is not just the touch of the air at the nose or at the upper lip. It’s the energy flow throughout the body, which is why when he gives breath meditation instructions he doesn’t say to focus here or focus there. But you can try focusing in one spot that’s clearest to observe. Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And you also get a sense of whether it feels good or not. Some parts of the body are more sensitive to the breathing energy than others. So try to find a spot that’s especially sensitive. It might be in the middle of the chest, around the solar plexus, in the throat. Wherever your sensitive spot is, focus there and try to please that spot. So the breath feels good coming in, the breath feels good going out. That way you’re creating a good feeling. And to do this you have to talk to yourself about what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing doesn’t feel good. And if it doesn’t feel good you can ask a what kind of breathing would feel good. You can experiment and observe. Make comments on what you like, what you don’t like. And if you find something that feels good you stick with it. Then you allow that comfortable feeling to spread throughout the body. All that involves talking to yourself. And then there are the perceptions you hold in mind, the images you have of how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out, how it starts. Which parts of the body are doing the breathing, which parts are the freeloaders, just coming along for the ride. Now when you do all this you’re fabricating what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication and mental fabrication with knowledge. You become more and more sensitive to what you’re actually doing to shape your experience in the present moment. And you see that yes, you really are active and going out after things. And you discover that by giving the mind something good to do and then watching it, you learn a lot about it that you wouldn’t know otherwise. It’s like learning about eggs. You could take an egg and just look at it for hours and you’d be able to say a few things about the egg. But if you really want to know eggs, you try cooking scrambled eggs, boiled eggs, omelets, souffles. And the better and better things you can do with the eggs, the more you know about them. This is one of the images that Ajahn Lee used. You learn about the eggs at the same time you feed yourself. The same with the meditation, you feed yourself with a sense of well-being. It gets easier and easier to stay here, to watch the mind. Those are the eggs you eat. And then the eggs you study as you try to make things out of them. That’s learning to get more and more observant about what you’re doing as you get the mind to settle down. It’s in this way that we learn how to create less stress and suffering for ourselves. And when we’re less stressed out, we’re going to find it easier to get along with other people. And other people will find it easier to get along with us. So when you meditate, like this, everybody benefits. You’re seeing the mind not only as it’s creating a sense of concentration, because that’s what you’re doing as you practice mindfulness. Some people describe mindfulness as one type of meditation and concentration as another type of meditation. But the Buddha wasn’t one of those people. Because the basic activities of mindfulness are that you keep one thing in mind and you watch it. That’s called alertness. Keeping one thing in mind is mindfulness. And then you’re ardent. You’re trying to really do this well. So you stay with the breath in and of itself. And then the other activity is to try to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts about the world right now, you put them aside. So two activities, three qualities of mind. Put them all together. And when you do that, then you get the mind into concentration. Because after all, that’s what concentration is. Focusing on one thing and putting aside thoughts that are not related to that one thing. And learning to do it with a sense of well-being. And in the process of doing this, you learn things about the mind. Both in getting the mind into concentration, and then when the mind is concentrated, still inside, you can see things going on in the mind that you wouldn’t have seen before. They’re very delicate, very subtle. Sometimes they’re not so subtle. They’re your disturbances. Your mind suddenly wandering off, going someplace else. But you learn how to observe that process. How many stages are there in a thought going away from the mind? Because for most of us, we’re pretty blank about what’s going on. It’s like when they’re put on a play. You’re going to move from one scene to another scene, they pull down the curtain. So you don’t see the stagehands moving the scenery around, because that would destroy the illusion. They wait until everything is in place, and the curtain goes up, and you’re in another place. Well the mind has that same tendency to pull a curtain down. When you leave the breath and go someplace else, and very gradually the curtain comes up, and you realize, “Oh, I’ve left the breath. I was supposed to be someplace else. Not where I am right now. I was supposed to be back with the breath.” You want to see what are the stages. How does the mind lie to itself like that? Which part is pulling the curtain down? Which part is out in the audience? Which part are the stagehands? And you learn that not by allowing the mind to wander around and just be aware of what its wanderings are. As soon as you realize the mind has wandered off, you bring it back. And you’re alert to the fact that it could wander off again. So you keep a lookout for it. And sure enough, you begin to see the signs. And you begin to see how much gets decided in the background, in the parts of the mind that you tend to cover up. But now the mind is quieter, with a sense of well-being. It’s willing to see those things, able to see those things. Here again, this is how you learn about the mind. Giving it a good thing to do, and then watching it. And Buddha calls this commitment and reflection. You really commit yourself to doing this. You tell yourself you’re going to do this as best you can. Then when you find out that your best is not yet good enough, you learn to improve. A lot of people come to meditation hoping to relax. And there is a rest that comes with a meditation. But we rest up first so that we can do work. This is a lot of work that needs to be done in the mind. Just this question of how the mind puts down curtains, you can study that for quite a while. Who’s fooling whom here? As the mind gets deeper and deeper into concentration, you begin to see the different layers of the mind. Different layers of conversation, layers of activity in the mind. And the more knowledge you can bring to this, the better. As the Buddha says, the Four Noble Truths, his analysis of suffering, have duties associated with them. The duty with regard to concentration and mindfulness is to develop it. And as you’re developing it, you learn to comprehend what’s going on, how the mind creates stress for itself, that you didn’t detect before, because your sensitivities have improved. And because you have a better sense of how to create a sense of well-being inside, you can have a clear set of values as to what kind of pleasures are worth going for and which ones are not, because you’re not so hungry. And when you can comprehend how you’re creating stress, you can see the causes and see that they’re not worth it. That’s how you abandon them. This is how you perform the duties with regard to the Four Noble Truths. You begin to see more and more clearly that it is possible to stop the processes that you’ve been doing that lead to suffering. It’s because you bring knowledge to what you’re doing, bring awareness to what you’re doing. You’re learning to ask the right questions. Because the causes for genuine suffering are here in the mind. We tend to focus on things outside, but the Buddha says again, the problem is not outside, it’s what’s coming from within. So we focus here. And we get clearer and clearer about what’s going on right here. The more clear we are about what we’re doing, the less we’re going to be creating the causes for suffering, causes for stress. So pay attention to what you’re doing, because there’s a lot to learn right here, a lot of valuable things to learn right here, things that are really good to know.

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