Heedfulness

August 25, 2024

OK, let’s meditate. Close your eyes. Take a couple good long deep in and out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. When we talk about breath, that’s what we’re talking about. The movement of energy. Not so much the feel of the air coming in over the nose. Through the nose. But the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and go out. And you notice, if you pay careful attention, that you can feel it almost anywhere in the body. But in some places it’s clearer than others. So focus your attention there. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Try to find a rhythm that feels good right now. And then just stick with it. Until it doesn’t feel good anymore, then you can change. So we’re putting in effort. But we’re also being very careful to watch the results of our efforts. Because this is a skill that we’re trying to develop. And the skill comes from doing. And then watching what you’re doing. Looking at the results. And if the results aren’t what you want, you can ask, what can I do differently? This is called right effort, as opposed to just brute effort. You don’t have to strangle the mind to keep it still. Actually, it’s better to find a sensation of ease with the breathing. So the mind will want to stay still right here with the breath. It’s like raising a child. If you beat the child, tie it up with chains and lock the door, it’s going to find a way to get out. But if you give it things to play with in the house, you don’t have to lock the doors or close the doors even. It’s going to stay. So try to take an interest in what the breath energy can do for you as you breathe in and breathe out. Because the breath, if you don’t pay attention to it, simply keeps you alive. But if you pay more attention to it, you begin to realize it can do things for the health of the body. So if you think of the veins in different parts of the body, you can think of the breath energy just going right through the pain. Sometimes we have a tendency to tense up around our pains. It’s like putting up a wall. And when there’s a wall, the energy can’t get in. So think of the wall being composed of atoms, and there’s space between the atoms, and the breath can penetrate. And sometimes you’ll find that the original pain is gone. All you had left was this shell of tension you’d build up around it. Other times the pain is still there, but you can relate to it in a way that’s less fearful. You can become more inquisitive. This is where we’re here to understand the things that pain the mind. Why do they cause that pain? And how can we stop that? It doesn’t mean we have to stop the pains in the body. But we do have to understand how it is that we create mental pains around the physical pains, or around emotional issues. And how we can take those mental pains apart. Understand that they’re not necessary. But to do that, you have to be willing to look at physical pain, and not run away. This is one of the reasons why we try to develop a state of concentration in the body. Concentration brings with it ease. So even though there may be parts of the body that are in pain, there are other parts that are not in pain. We can pay more attention there to begin with, to make those our foundation. Because the mind needs a home in the present moment in order to stay here. Otherwise it’s going to keep running away. But if you give it a good comfortable place to stay, feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out, then you can face your pains a lot more calmly. And when you’re more calm, you can see things more clearly for what they are. You can ask yourself, “How can I perceive this pain in a way that doesn’t inflict me so much?” And you ask yourself, “Is the pain one solid block of pain, or is it lots of little moments of pain?” And if you look carefully, you see that it is made up of little moments. They come and they go, come and they go. And you ask yourself, “When they come, do they come at you, or do they just appear?” Or you can even hold in mind the perception that as soon as they appear, they’re going away. Like sitting in the back of an old station wagon, facing backwards. It’s a station wagon that goes down the road. As soon as anything appears in the range of your awareness, range of your eyesight, it’s already going away. What happens when you look at the pain that way? And you’ll see that by looking at it calmly in this way, you begin to understand it more. And you gain some tools in how not to suffer so much from it. These different tools that you’re using here, they’re called the five strengths. The first strength is strength of conviction. Technically, it means convinced that the Buddha really was awakened. But more importantly, you’re convinced that his awakening has some messages for you right now. And one of the lessons that he learned was that the reason we suffer is not so much of things happening to us, it’s what the mind is doing. The situation in the world outside can be really bad, but you don’t have to suffer. The situation in your body can be bad, but you don’t have to suffer. That leads to the second strength, which is strength of persistence. You try to develop the good qualities in mind that take you away from suffering, help you to understand the suffering, help you understand the pain. And you try to abandon the qualities that make you more pained. You realize that you do have the choice. A while back I was teaching a retreat and someone was telling me that she had been told that we can’t change our perceptions, that however we perceive things, that’s the way we always will perceive things. If that were the case, you’d be lost. We can change our perceptions. We can train them to be good perceptions. Every perception is like a sketch you have in the mind. It says this is this and that is that. This means this. This means that. If you actually compared your perception with the reality, you’d see that the perception is just a sketch. What you want to make sure is that your sketch, on the one hand, is true to the facts that it’s representing. And then two, it’s actually helpful and free the mind from its sufferings. Because there are some things out there that are true that, as you think about them, make you suffer more. But you could turn your perceptions around. They’d still be true. They’d be pointing to different facts, different features. But they don’t make you suffer. So what we’re trying to develop on the path is perceptions that lead away from suffering. That’s what the effort is for. To generate perceptions of that sort and to abandon perceptions that get in the way. Now you know how to do this because of the quality of mindfulness. You’ve learned things in the past from your practice or learned things from what you’ve read or heard. And you want to have that knowledge available to you. Otherwise you have to keep reinventing everything every time you sit down to meditate. And even then, you’ve learned something and you forget it right away. You need this quality of mindfulness. Mindfulness to remember. Sometimes we’re told that mindfulness means open, accepting awareness. But that’s not how the Buddha used the term. For him it’s a function of your memory. And you want to remember things so you can recognize a problem. As soon as you see a problem, you realize, this is this kind of problem, this is that kind of problem. And what have you learned about problems of that sort in the past? How to deal with them. You may have learned this from what you’ve heard. You may have learned this from your own experience. But you want to make use of the memories you have. In particular, you want to learn how to remember the ways of getting the mind to settle down. Even in spite of the turmoil in the world, the mind doesn’t have to be in turmoil too. We live in a world where we share certain aspects of the world with other people, but we each have our own inner world. That nobody else can know. It’s like that old question when you see blue and other people look at the same patch and they say that it’s blue too. Does their blue look like your blue? You don’t know. Your blue is totally yours. Well it’s the same with your own pain. Same with your own suffering. And it’s also the same with all the good qualities you can develop in the mind that can help you get past that suffering, overcome that suffering. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. Getting focused inside the body. So we become more and more aware of this part of our world, the part where we are in charge, or can be in charge, if we learn the right skills. And when the mind has calmed down like this, then you can use your discernment to see more and more clearly where the problems are in the mind and how you can get past them. So these are all the strengths that the Buddha would recommend that we work on developing. We need them all the time. But now when we’re healthy and young and strong, or relatively young and strong, we have the opportunity to develop them so that when the time comes when we’re weaker, older, closer to death, we’ll have some good skills to fall back on. This is called being heedful. So we’re practicing that your actions are what shape your life. And they can shape them in a skillful way or an unskillful way. So you want to be very careful about what you do. So heedfulness means there are dangers. If you act on unskillful thoughts, the suffering could be long-term. But there’s also the possibility of avoiding those dangers. If you couldn’t avoid them, heedfulness wouldn’t mean anything. This is why when the Buddha taught, sometimes he’d teach in a pleasing way, sometimes he’d teach in a way that wasn’t so unpleasant, excuse me, wasn’t so pleasing, to remind people that their actions really do have consequences. And they can’t just sit around and relax. They’ve got to think about what their actions are going to mean for the future. And as you’re meditating, you’re developing some skills that you definitely will need in the future. So many things could happen that you don’t know about, that you can’t anticipate. But you do know that whatever happens, the more mindfulness you have, the more concentration you have, the more discernment you have in seeing cause and effect, and what’s going to be a skillful action, what’s going to be an unskillful action, then the better prepared you’ll be for whatever. We have that chant. And we repeat again and again. I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. I haven’t gone beyond these things. The Thai translation is that aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal. And when these things are normal, you have to prepare for them for sure. So this is why we need to develop these strengths. Conviction. Persistence. Mindfulness. Concentration. Discernment. All based on heedfulness. That way, when the time comes, we’ll be able to depend on ourselves. And as the Buddha says, when you have yourself as your mainstay, you’ve found a mainstay that’s hard to find. We’re looking for safety in this world. We have to make ourselves safe. We’re looking for refuge in this world. We have to learn how to be our own refuge. We’re looking for something reliable. When we’re reliable, then we know that we’re safe for sure.

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