A Call to Action

November 3, 2024

Try to be sensitive to the way you breathe and notice what way of breathing feels good. You can try long breathing, deep, short, shallow, heavy, light, fast or slow. Take some time to see what the body needs right now in terms of the way you breathe. You can try energizing breathing if you’re feeling tired, soothing breathing if you’re feeling frazzled, relaxing if you’re feeling tense. You’re basically giving the mind some food for the practice. That’s one of the images the Buddha gives. You’ve got a fortress at the edge of the frontier. You’ve got a gatekeeper at the gate, i.e. mindfulness, to make sure that the enemy doesn’t come in. That only the friends come in. You’ve got the soldiers who have to fight off any enemies that do manage to slip in. They need food, and the food is concentration. So feed your mind well. Although you don’t have to be in a hurry to get back to work, there is work to be done. Feed the mind as much as it needs, with a sense of pleasure. Sometimes you hear that you have to be very careful about the pleasure of concentration, because if it gets too intense, you get addicted to it. But the real problem is if you don’t get into concentration, the mind just wanders around in its thoughts, without any real nourishment. No matter how much you may see the drawbacks of sensuality as the Buddha said, if you don’t have the pleasure, the rapture that can come from getting the mind into absorption, you’re still going to go back to your old ways, unskillful ways. So feeding the mind well is important. And take however much time you need to feed. But do remember there’s work to be done. It’s like feeding the body. If you simply eat, eat, eat, you get fat and flabby. If you eat a lot, but also exercise, you get strong. And the mind doesn’t need exercise, because it’s got a lot of problems inside, but it can work on those problems. And the strength it gets from the concentration is what enables it to pry inside and look at what it’s doing. It’s causing suffering. Stress. Admit to itself what it’s doing and learn how to stop those bad habits. One of the big ironies about how Buddhism has come to the West is that in the time of the Buddha he was very much opposed to theories or schools of thought that said that you had no power, that human action was powerless. Some saying that there basically wasn’t anything there besides just physical events. Which were determined by physical laws. Others saying that there was no self. Or everything was determined by your past actions. In all those cases the Buddha said you’re teaching people a doctrine of inaction and when you have a doctrine of inaction people are left defenseless. They have no way of doing anything to counteract whatever suffering is going on in the mind. He said the big irony is that at the moment, or present, there are a lot of people saying when the Buddha teaches you that you can’t do anything, either because there is no self, or because of the power of past actions. You just simply have to watch conditions rolling along. And the Buddha never taught anything like that. With regard to the issue of self, he says it’s a strategy we have. We need to learn how to use our sense of self. Wisely. So if we know that we’re competent to do this path, and we’ll benefit from it, we can look at our actions, observe the results, and direct ourselves in the right direction. There will come times when you do let go of things, seeing them as not-self. That’s because you’re passing a value judgment. Right now it’s worth your while to hold on to certain things as being you or yours. Someday you’ll let them go when you don’t need them anymore. But you do need a sense that you are capable of doing this path and you will benefit from it. We can see this in that passage that we chanted just now on equanimity. It’s actually a later tradition of Buddhism that that particular contemplation is used for equanimity. That all beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. You can think about that and say, “Well, I just learned how to accept that everything is the way it’s got to be. I can be equanimous about it. I just accept that that’s the way things are.” But that’s the attitude of a Brahma, not the attitude of a Buddha. We use those contemplations to calm the mind. So we can actually get to work in our meditation. There’s more to be done. Because when the Buddha has you, think about that. In fact, all beings are the heirs to their actions, owners of their actions. This is a different purpose. He says it’s to give rise to the path. In other words, you develop a sense of Sanghvega, thinking about no matter where you go in this universe, no matter where you’re born, no matter what the levels of heaven are, no matter what, those beings are still subject to their karma. And because karma is impermanent, it’s inconstant, their status is going to be inconstant as well. When you look at the Buddha’s perception of the world that he had on the night of his awakening, beings that were dying and then being reborn in the light of their karma, sometimes they pop up and then they get lazy and get complacent. And then they fall. There are several cases where the Buddha had to go teach some Brahmas who had got the idea in their heads that where they had attained was as far as anybody could go. Because they’d stayed there for a long, long time. And he had to prove to them that he knew some things they didn’t know. So we have these contemplations. And not just to sit there. They’re actually a call to action. If you don’t want to be subject to this principle of action, first you have to learn how to use it wisely. But you do have to make use of it. You do have to do things. And John Foreman, who usually didn’t get involved in controversial issues, did. He pointed out that a lot of people think that the path is simply one of letting go, letting go, letting go. He said that’s not the case. There are things you have to develop. You have to develop your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment. Sometimes this takes work. Because sometimes you can look at the causes of suffering and they just go away. Like dew on the grass when the sun rises. But there are a lot of things that don’t go away when the sun rises. They just stay where they are. In a case like that, the Buddha says you have to exert a fabrication. You have to look at the way you breathe. You have to look at the way you talk to yourself. Look at the images you hold in mind with regard to that issue. Why is it that you’re holding on? What’s the allure? You’ve got to dig down to find this. Because oftentimes the mind can lie to itself very easily. And we tend to allow ourselves to be lied to. We don’t like to dig into the reasons why we do things that are unskillful. But if we don’t dig down, there’s no way we’re going to understand why we do them. And if we don’t understand why we do them, we’re not going to be able to stop. Think about that other chandra we had just now. The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own. The world is a slave to craving. It’s insufficient, insatiable. You don’t just sit there and say, “Well, that’s the way it is. I’ll learn how to accept my cravings and be okay. This is what craving is like. I’ll just notice that.” The Buddha has you think about that. Do you want to keep on being a slave? No. There’s a way out. So we practice concentration not to just sit here in concentration. We get closer and closer to our awareness of the present moment, not just to stay aware of the present moment, but because there’s work to be done here. The present moment is not a place to rest. That’s what the teaching on inconstancy is all about. Again, sometimes we use it to simply accept the fact that things are going to change. Aging comes. Illness comes. Death comes. This body wears away. Our mind begins to get less and less functional. We notice that. And some of those things we have to accept, but there are also things we don’t have to accept. The strength of the mind doesn’t have to waste away. We learn how to understand the ways in which things are inconstant, how they’re dependent on causes, and then work on those causes so we can free ourselves from our slavery. Again, it’s a call to action. The action needs strength. We provide ourselves with strength by feeding it with concentration, feeding the mind with concentration, and then we put it to work. Always keep that in mind. There are some people who say, “Make sure you don’t get stuck in concentration as soon as the mind settles down a little bit. Put it to work. Feed it well, because you’ve got some heavy work to do. So make sure it’s well nourished so that you’re up for the task.”

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