Acceptance Without Suffering

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Close your eyes and take some long, deep breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Because when we speak of the breath, we’re not talking about the air coming in and out through the nose. We’re talking about the feeling of energy in the body that allows the air to come in, allows it to go out. So where do you feel that? Focus there. And then ask yourself if long breathing feels good. If it does, you keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Make it shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. See what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. If you’re feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that’s relaxing. If you’re feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you energy. If you’re feeling frazzled, try to breathe in a way that feels soothing inside. Because an important principle in concentration practice is that you have a sense of well-being. The object fits with the mind, the mind fits with the object. They feel good together. You need this sense of well-being inside. Not only while you’re sitting here meditating, but also as you go through the day. It’s good while we’re meditating because that allows you to want to stay with the breath. The one problem is that sometimes you focus on the comfort, you forget about the breath, and the mind just loses focus. You’re here, you’re at your ease, but you don’t really know where you are. That’s not what you want. You want to be alert. That’s why the Buddha tells you to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Think of it from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, the tips of the fingers, all the parts of the body. Think of them all breathing together. And the effort that you have to make in order to maintain that whole body awareness can help keep you awake. If the whole body is too big, you can focus on one section at a time. Start down around the navel, then move up to the stomach, the chest, the head, down the shoulders, down the back, out the legs. Keep revolving around in the body. You really are ready to settle down. We need this sense of well-being also when we’re not formally meditating. Because as we go through the world, we’re going to meet up with a lot of things we don’t like. Our main problem is that we’re looking for food for the mind outside, because the body and the mind both need food. Food for the body is pretty simple. We know what that is, what it is. Food for the mind, you have to ask yourself, what are you feeding on? You can feed on your intentions. You can feed on contact at the senses. The problem with feeding on contact at the senses is you start looking for all your food out there in the world outside. And sometimes it has good food for you, and sometimes it has pretty miserable food. Which is why it’s good to have something good inside. You have your own independent source. So no matter how bad the food is outside, you’ve got your food inside. You’re okay. Because there’s a lot of things in the world we have to put up with. We hear so much about acceptance as being the essence of the Buddhist teachings. And there are some things he has you accept. But he doesn’t have you simply put up with them. He has you think about them, understand them, understand your relationship to the things that are unpleasant in such a way that you don’t have to suffer from them. At the same time, there are a lot of things he says you don’t accept. It’s good to know the difference. As for the things you do accept, here are some of the skills. There are going to be people who say unpleasant things. This is a fact of the world. As the Buddha said, this is the nature of human speech. People will say things that are true, and they’ll say things that are false. They’ll say things that mean well and don’t mean well. Things that are useful, things that are useless. So if you’re subject to falsehoods, useless words, words meant to hurt your feelings, you have to remind yourself this is a common feature of human speech. If you want to go to a place where there’s no speech like that at all, you’re in the wrong place. That’s one way of thinking about it, that this is just a common nature of human speech. And then you ask yourself, when someone says something unpleasant, exactly where do you feel it? It’s a contact at the ear, and that’s it. But for some reason it seems to reverberate in the mind. And that is our responsibility. What the other person said is his or her responsibility. But the extent to which it reverberates inside, that’s our responsibility. Why do you want to keep stabbing yourself with unpleasant words? Well, it’s because we like to feed off of other people’s words. We want kind words, true words, helpful words. We want to feed off of that. But again, the world has all kinds of food, good and bad, to offer. We’re better off if we learn how to feed ourselves inside. That way when someone says something unpleasant, then, as the Buddha said, you can know an unpleasant sound is made contact at the ear, and then it stops. And when the contact stops, that’s the end of the matter. You don’t have to pick it up, you don’t have to chew it. In a John Lee’s image where people, like people who see that someone has spit something else out, and so we pick up what they’ve spit out and we chew out it ourselves. And then when we get sick, who are you going to blame? You were the one who picked it up and started eating it. So we think in these ways we can live in a world where there’s a lot of unpleasant speech going on. And you don’t have to suffer from it. You learn to understand your mind’s own lack of skill. And you can replace it with a better skill. When you’re hungry for something that gives you a sense of strength and well-being, you can provide that food for yourself. That’s one of the things you have to accept, the fact that there’s going to be unpleasant speech. Another thing you have to accept is the fact that there’s going to be pain in the body. We learned this when we were first born. It hurt to come out. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to be. Having our skin subject to the air. We’ve learned to get used to the air. We’ve learned to get used to breathing. But still, there’s going to be pain. Here again, we have to accept the fact that there is pain, but we don’t have to simply suffer from it. The Buddha offers some suggestions. When there’s pain in the body, it doesn’t have to fill the whole body. We tend to focus on the places that are painful, and begin to neglect the places that can be made comfortable. And one of the ways you can deal with pain first is to find a sense of comfort someplace else in the body. Focus on that. Learn how to maintain that by the way you breathe. So here again, getting in touch with your breath, learning how to create a sense of well-being with the breath, is going to be helpful. That way you don’t feel so totally invaded by the pain, or overcome by the pain. Then when you come from a sense of well-being, you can think of that good breath energy spreading through the pain. See what that does. Because sometimes, one of the worst parts of the pain is the fact that we tense up around it. And there are times when we’ve tensed up around the pain, the actual causes for the pain are gone, but the tension is still there. So see if you can breathe through the tension. Breathe through whichever part of the body the pain is in. Don’t let the breath get stopped by the pain. And then when you’re ready, you can start looking into the pain itself. And again, it’s a matter of asking yourself how you think about the pain. What perceptions you have about the pain. The same as when we’re dealing with unpleasant words. It’s your perception that you feed on. The stories you build up around it. Those are the things that make the mind suffer, in the same way with the pain. The images you hold in mind about the pain, you can think of it as being a big block. Or you can think of that as being individual moments of pain that come and go. And when they come, you can think of them not coming at you, but going away from you. See what that perception does. In both cases, you begin to realize the power of your perceptions to make you suffer or not make you suffer. This is an important aspect of wisdom, discernment. That you can be with things that would ordinarily make you suffer, but you don’t have to suffer. After all, our hunts live in this world. They have bodies that have pains. They live in a world where people can say unpleasant things about them, but they’ve learned how not to suffer from those things. Part of their skill is learning how to get the mind quiet. Another part is learning how to investigate the way they talk to themselves about those unpleasant things, and to train themselves to talk about it in new ways, to hold new perceptions in mind. That’s an aspect of wisdom and discernment. Because as we train our minds, we need both the stillness that comes from concentration, and the insight that comes from discernment. The stillness allows us to see things that we wouldn’t have seen if we just tried to analyze things. And the analysis allows us to understand connections that we might not have seen if we just tried to be still. Both sides you need to understand what’s going on, and to learn how not to suffer from it. So those are some of the things you have to accept in this world. When you realize that you’ve made mistakes in the past, you’ve harmed yourself, you’ve harmed other people, it’s the same sort of thing. You have to accept that yes, you did that, and yes, it was harmful. But you also have to realize that getting tied up or remorse is not going to solve the problem. Just tell yourself, “That was not right. I want never to make that mistake again.” And then spread lots of goodwill, goodwill to yourself, so you don’t beat yourself up. Goodwill for others, the people you’ve harmed, and other people in general. To remind yourself that you really don’t want to harm other people. You want to be careful about your actions. Here again, you have to accept things that are unpleasant, remembering of your own mistakes. But you learn how not to suffer from them. You focus on the future. You realize that everybody makes mistakes. The important thing is whether you’re going to learn from them. Then you can pick yourself up and move on. So those are some of the things you have to accept. But you don’t just sit there with them. You learn to analyze how you’re creating suffering out of them. The physical pain is one thing, but why is there mental pain along with it? Well, you’re the one who added the mental pain. Unpleasant words are unpleasant sounds. But if you make yourself suffer from them, again, you’re the one who’s creating the suffering. Which means that you can learn how not to do that. So that’s how we deal with the things we have to accept. As for the things the Buddha says not to accept, any unskillful thought comes up in the mind. He says, “You don’t just let it stay. You try to take it apart.” And abandon it. You realize that when you have an unskillful emotion like lust or anger, it’s made up of three things. The way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, and the perceptions you hold in mind. The same three things you needed to focus on when you’re learning how not to suffer from things you have to accept. In this case, you notice how you’re breathing, say, when you’re angry, what you’re talking to yourself about, when you’re angry. Someone has done something bad and you’re talking about it. Focus on how bad that was, how outrageous it was, how they shouldn’t have done that. Maybe you want to see them suffer. That’s when your anger turns into ill-will. You can tell yourself, “Okay, this kind of thinking is not helping.” There are other ways I can look at the situation. You can think of the good points of that other person. You can remind yourself that if you’re angry, you can’t think straight. You won’t be able to solve the situation. So you’ve got to calm down. And then look at the perceptions you hold in mind. How you perceive the situation, how you perceive what should be done. And ask yourself, “Where are my perceptions wrong?” What perception would be useful and to hold in mind? Like when someone does something bad, you remind yourself that they do have their good side. And the Buddha gives you an image. You’re walking through the desert. You’re hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You come across some water in a cow’s footprint. Now you know if you tried to scoop that water up with your hand, it would get muddy. You couldn’t drink it. So what do you have to do? You have to get down on all fours and slurp it up. It may seem to be a demeaning posture, but that’s what you have to do. In the same way, you may think, “This person is really bad. Why should I be thinking about his or her good points?” It’s demeaning. But if you’re going to live in this world and behave in a way that’s skillful, you have to think of the good in other people. That’s your motivation for wanting to do good for them, to treat them well, and to have some compassion for them. Now compassion doesn’t mean simply letting them do what they want to do. Sometimes it means stop their unskillful behavior. But if you’re going to do that effectively, you have to come from a position of goodwill. So you take apart your unskillful emotion in terms of how you’re breathing, how you’re talking to yourself, the perceptions you hold in mind. And then you put together a more skillful state. So don’t just accept the anger. You accept the fact that it’s there, but you also accept the fact that you can do something about it. You don’t have to be wallowing in the anger. As the Buddha said, if we couldn’t abandon unskillful qualities, he wouldn’t have taught it. If we couldn’t develop skillful qualities, he wouldn’t have taught that either. So there’s some things you have to accept, some things you don’t accept. But in both cases, you have to understand what you’re doing, understand the way you’re breathing, understand the way you talk to yourself. Understand the perceptions you hold in mind. And learn how to do all of that in a skillful way. Use the comfort of the breath as food when you’re dealing with things you have to accept, that you can’t change. And use the breath as a way of taking apart unskillful mind states that you can change. So pay careful attention to the breath. It has a lot to offer. And this skill of learning what to accept, what not to accept, and how not to suffer in either case.

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