A Path of Skills

December 31, 2024

When we torn down the old sala, people regretted all the power that had accumulated over the many years of practice in the sala. Now we have a new one, a new meditation hall, a new ordination hall. So let’s create some power here through our meditation. Start with thoughts of goodwill. For all those who contributed with the work, the money, their time, their energy. May they all find happiness. Then focus on your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you’re feeling in the body. Wherever there are sensations that you know, now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Focus on those sensations. Then notice if they’re comfortable. If they are, keep it up. If they’re not, you can change. You can make the breath shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. You can experiment. See what kind of breathing feels good. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stay with it until it doesn’t feel so good anymore, and then you can change. Keep being aware of what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. We do this so that we can understand the mind. In the Buddha’s first sermon that we chanted just now, he pointed out that the reason we’re suffering is not because of things outside, it’s because of things we’re doing, things that are happening in the mind, our craving, our clinging. And the problem is that we’re not really aware of what we’re doing, which is why we blame the outside when the real problem is in here. So to solve the problem of suffering, we have to become more sensitive to what we’re doing, more sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. And the best way to observe the mind is to watch it as it’s trying to develop a skill. That way you are most sensitive to what you’re doing and the results you’re getting, and seeing the connection between the two, so that you can improve. So like right now, working with the breath, you’re beginning to notice that the way you focus on the breath and the images you hold in mind will have a huge impact on how you experience the breath, and how easy or how hard it is to make it comfortable. The problem is in the mind. But if you want to dig out the source of the problem, you say we have to watch it in action, and this is the best place to do it. Because breathing is our most basic function. You can live for a certain number of days without sleep, you can live for a certain number of days without water, food, but you can’t live very long without breathing. So we focus on this as our most basic skill, learning how to breathe properly. In the course of that, we get to observe the mind. I’ve heard some people complain, they say, when you’re working with the breath, “Why do you choose that as your meditation topic? After all, when you die, the breath will leave you, and at that point you’ll be left without any help, without any support.” Well, they miss what’s going on in breath meditation. Just look at the way the Buddha taught mindfulness. It’s not just focusing on the breath. You’re focusing on the process of fabrication, how the mind puts its experience together, through the way it breathes, through the way it talks to itself, the perceptions and feelings it holds in mind. And even when the breath leaves you, that other knowledge will be there to sustain you, because you will want to know how the way you talk to yourself has an influence on how you shape your experience and where you’re going to go. The same with the perceptions you hold in mind, the images, the words that you latch onto. These will have a huge impact. And so we focus on the breath, so we become more sensitive to these processes inside the mind. And the more we focus on doing this well, the more we’re going to learn, both about the breath, but more importantly, about the mind. There are four qualities that go into the success of any skill, and that’s what we’re working on here. The Buddha’s images for people who practice are not of scribes who figure out a concept, or people who hammer things out with their logic. In other words, it’s not a theory. The images are of people who master skills, cooks, carpenters, archers. People have to be very careful to notice what they’re doing and how they can improve it. This is where the four qualities that go into developing a skill come in. You start with desire. You have to want to master the skill, but you also have to learn how to balance your desire so it doesn’t get in the way. Because you simply sit there wanting, wanting, wanting to get the results, but without actually doing the causes, the desire becomes a problem. But if you focus your desire on the causes, then it becomes a part of the solution. But we’re trying to create a state of concentration in the mind. You have to want the mind to settle down, which means you have to want to stay with the object of concentration. You have to learn how to want to be with the breath, and how to want to deal with all the issues that come up with learning how to breathe well. The Buddha tells you you want to breathe in a way that spreads feelings of pleasure, rapture through the body. You want to figure out how to do that. It involves how you talk to yourself, how you breathe, and the perceptions, the images you hold in mind, the feelings you focus on. So take an interest in wanting to know these things, wanting to master these skills. It’s the same as building a sala. We have to want to have a new place. The old place was good, but it was being eaten up by termites. So even though there are going to be difficulties involved in demolishing the old buildings and building the new ones in their place, we have to want to do this for it to happen. We have to want to pay attention to all the steps that were involved. That brings in two other qualities that the Buddha said go into success in any skill. One is persistence, when you really try to do it well. The other is intentness, when you really focus your full attention on what you’re doing. We go through life knowing that we’re breathing, but for the most part we don’t pay that much attention to it, and as a result we don’t get as much out of the breath as we could. And the same with the mind. The mind gives in to its cravings, it gives in to its clingings, and then it suffers. It doesn’t know why, because it’s not paying attention. So if you want to learn about craving, give yourself something good to desire, and then watch what goes into trying to attain that desire, paying full attention. Finally, the fourth quality is analysis. You have to figure things out, run into challenges, and you have to figure them out. And try to figure out how to do them well. It’s the same with meditation. If the mind doesn’t settle down, you don’t just give up. You don’t say, “Well, I’ve learned a lesson that concentration is inconstant and permanent. Leave it alone.” You have to build a state of concentration in the mind to understand it. Like the old principle, if you want to understand eggs, you don’t just sit and look at the eggs, or think about the eggs, or come up with theories about the eggs. You cook with them. You try soufflés, you try scrambled eggs, you try omelets, steamed eggs. And in the course of that you learn a lot about the eggs. And the better the dish you can make with them, the more they can sustain you. The more you can keep up your interest in wanting to learn more about eggs. So it’s the same with the mind. The more you can create a sense of well-being inside by the way you focus on the breath, by the way you understand what you’re doing, the more you’re going to know about the mind. So these are the four qualities that go into success in any skill. Success in building this new meditation hall. Success in getting the mind to settle down. So it gains some insight and understanding into itself. You see it more clearly. Because it’s engaged in doing something good. And that’s how you understand it. Because these qualities, these four qualities, are going to success. Desire, persistence, intent, and using your powers of analysis. They can be used for any sort of activity. You can use them to succeed in anger, you can use them to succeed in lust. You want to be angry about somebody? There’s the desire to be angry. And then you can put a lot of effort into thinking about why it’s a good thing. You can testify to being angry. You can focus your full attention on what you think of that other person has done wrong. You can analyze ways of getting back at that person. You succeed, but do you succeed in accomplishing anything worth? And then the question of doing that is, is it easy to observe your mind? When you’re taken up with anger, you focus more on things outside. What’s going on in the mind gets obscured. The same with lust. You focus on the object of your lust. You want it. You work at it. You give it your full attention. You try to figure out ways of getting what you want. But the mind is dark. It’s obscured. It’s only when you’re doing something really skillful with the mind that it’s easy to observe it. So getting the mind to get concentrated is an important skill you need to master. The Buddha put it at the heart of the path. We start with the right view. Notice that it’s right view, it’s not right knowledge. We have opinions about what causes suffering and how we can go about putting an end to it, to give us guidance in what we’re going to do. But in order for right view to become really detailed, it needs the help of all the other factors of the path, and particularly right concentration. Because it’s in the course of getting the mind concentrated that you begin to see where your cravings are, what you’re holding on to, the things that you hold on to that prevent you from getting into concentration, things you crave that disturb your concentration. You see them a lot more clearly because you have this one focal point in mind. Without your ability to settle down like this, whatever you may know about the path, it’s all just theory, and it’s all abstractions. You’re dealing with the actual events in the mind as you’re getting the mind to settle down. Sorting out which ones you want to focus on, which ones you want to put aside. Which is why we’re working on this skill. In the different forests of the Jhansi, John Lee was the one who most often would bring in this image of mastering skills. Learning how to meditate is like learning how to settle down. How to sew a pair of pants, how to weave a basket, how to take silver or gold and make them into ornaments, how to make clay tiles. It’s all the same four principles of having the desire, persistence, giving your full attention, and then reflecting on what you’re doing, figuring out where it can be improved. We’ll have the same sensitivity as we meditate to this problem of suffering. Why is there suffering in the mind? We’ll observe it as it’s trying to do something good. And we’ll see that even with its best intentions, there are still things that need to be improved. You get more sensitive to how a state of concentration is put together. You realize that it’s put together in the same way that all other states of becoming are put together. It gives you your prime evidence for how to take these things apart. And it’s in taking them apart, as the Buddha pointed out, it’s like dismantling a house. One way of learning how a house is built is to take it apart piece by piece by piece. In the same way, you take these states of suffering that the mind has created for itself apart, and you learn how you don’t have to do them ever again. That’s where this skill is special. There’s never really any end to the skills of the world. You build a new building, someday it’s going to fall down, and it’ll have to be replaced. Even before it falls down, it has to be maintained. And the people who maintain it have to know something about how it was built so they can maintain it properly. The work never ends. But with the work of training the mind, there is an end. And it’s a good end. As the Buddha said, it’s the ultimate happiness, the ultimate freedom, the ultimate truth. It’s an awareness that is totally free of all the restrictions of the world. That’s where we’re aiming. But to get there, we have to learn how to take apart what we’re doing right now, to understand it. If we don’t understand it, or if we just have a theoretical understanding, it’s not going to happen. You can read about it, but only when you actually try to master the skills of the path. If you get past the ignorance, you get standing in the way. Because remember, the word “ignorance,” or the Pali word for ignorance, avijjana, also means “lack of skill.” So we overcome our ignorance by mastering these skills, and in no other way. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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