The Skills of Truth & Calm

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The Buddha’s most basic teaching is the Four Noble Truths. It’s a teaching about action, cause and effect in your actions. And to understand it, you have to get very sensitive to what you are actually doing. This is why we watch the mind right now. It’s hard to observe a past action or a future action. So you have to observe it right here. As the Buddha indicates through many images in the Canon, we’re working on a skill. He compares meditation to being a skilled archer, a skilled cook, a skilled carpenter. It’s good to think about what that means. When you’re working on a skill, you get really sensitive to what you’re doing in this course. It connects directly with the Four Noble Truths. If you’re going to see what you’re doing, work on a skill. You get very conscious about what you do, the results you’re getting, and learning how to judge the results so that you can get better. We’re working on something good here to get the mind to settle down. Here again, the mind is easiest to observe when it’s doing something good. When you’re being devious or being underhanded and not quite honest, you hide things from yourself, and you hide from yourself the fact that you’re hiding things from yourself. Or you know that you’re doing something good. It’s easy to be open and honest about when you’re doing it right and when you’re not. Because we’re focused on getting the mind to be still, it makes what’s going on in the mind really transparent. Remember the Buddha said that our trouble is that we have cravings that lead to becoming. Every problem that comes up to us, about what we want, about what we don’t want, we create a state of becoming around it. We’re like beavers. Whatever the problem is that faces the beaver, his solution is one thing. Build a dam. We need to put a lodge in the lake. Even beavers that haven’t been raised by their parents, that were separated by their parents as children, raised in captivity, when they’re released into the wild, they build dams and build lodges. Our solution to everything is to create a state of becoming. A sense of you in a world of experience, around something you desire. As long as you’ve created one of those, there’s going to be suffering. And if you try to destroy what you’ve created, there’s going to be suffering too. So the trick is to catch the process before it’s turned into a state of becoming. That’s what we’re doing as we meditate. If you look at dependent-core arising, even before there’s sensory contact, there are some factors that we are actually focusing directly on as we meditate. You’ve got fabrication. You’ve got the breath. Okay, we’re focused on the breath. You’ve got direct thought and evaluation. You’re talking to yourself. Well, you’re talking to yourself about the breath. About the mind settling down with the breath, trying to get them snugly together. And then you’ve got perceptions and feelings. You’re trying to create a feeling of ease, well-being. And you’ve got certain perceptions about how the body relates to the mind, the mind relates to the body. Where is your mind? Where is your mind right now in relation to the body? And perceptions about the breath. When the breath comes in, what’s actually happening? You’ve got air coming in through the nose, going into the lungs. But there’s an energy in the body that allows that to happen. And it’s the energy that the Buddha wants you to focus on. So there you are. As you’re working on concentration, you’re dealing directly with this first factor, independent co-arising, right after ignorance. And you work your way down. You get to name and form. Well, here you are again. Form is the body as you experience in terms of its properties. And one of those properties is the wind property. And an aspect of the wind property is the in and out breath. But as you settle down, you may notice you’re also sensitive to the warmth in the body, the liquid feelings in the body. The salinity of the body. So again, you’ve got these raw materials right here. As for name, that includes perception again, feeling again, attention, intention, contact. Attention, you’re paying attention to the breath. And the question you’re asking yourself is, how do I get the mind to settle down? Once it’s settled down, how do I get to understand the process of fabrication? It’s all right here. The intention, of course, is your intention is to stay with the breath. To stay with one object. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So the mind can settle down. So these processes that we tend to slip through very quickly are being laid out. And we’re getting a handle on them. As John Chauhan said, “With the different factors of dependent co-arising, normally it’s like falling out of a tree. You go past lots of different branches. But it’s such a blur that it’s hard to see which branch is which.” But when you’re settling down and being still, that gives you a chance to examine the different branches. And at first you get attached to them because these are the raw materials from which you create a state of concentration. But then you’re working here not only with the idea of creating a state of concentration, there’s what the Buddha calls the four determinations. You’re determined on discernment. You’re determined on truth, relinquishment, and stilling, or peace. And so you’re trying to use your discernment to understand how to get the mind to settle down. You’re true to yourself in trying to master this. And being very honest about when the mind is wandering off, so you can do something about it. Relinquishment, you’re letting go of anything that’s going to get in the way of the concentration. And calm, you’re trying to bring the mind to greater and greater states of calm. So these are things that give some direction to this skill. Another aspect of developing a skill is that when you first get started, it’s awkward. You’re not quite confident in what you’re doing. You’re not familiar with the tools. And that develops a very strong sense of self. Wherever you encounter any resistance, any obstacles, there’s going to be a strong sense of self. And either you give in to the obstacles or you overcome them. So you’re going to have to overcome the obstacles. That requires that you develop a healthy sense of self. A sense of who you are and what you can do. The Buddha starts by saying this is something that all human beings can do. It may not be easy for everybody, but it’s something that everybody can do, and it’s worthwhile. If it weren’t possible and if it weren’t worthwhile, the Buddha said he wouldn’t have taught this. Simply the fact that you’re a human being means that you’ve got what it takes. You’re going to have confidence in that. The teaching of students would repeat this again and again, that we as human beings are in the ideal position to master the teachings. Most of his students were from very poor families in the Northeast, which is the poorest section of Thailand. They’re at the bottom of the ladder in the Thai social structure. They found they had to keep giving them confidence. The Buddha himself would urge, rouse, and encourage his students in addition to just instructing them, to remind them, yes, they can do this. So as you’re dealing with the obstacles of trying to master this skill, and things don’t quite fit, the mind doesn’t fit with the breath, the breath doesn’t fit with the mind, different members of the inner committee seem to be rebelling, you have to have a strong sense that yes, you can do this. And you don’t let setbacks get you down. You learn how to talk to yourself in a way that is encouraging, and rousing, and urging. So you want to do this. And then you begin to have tastes of what mental peace is like. And you have to learn how to use those tastes to encourage yourself, and not to get discouraged. Don’t be a voice in the mind that says, ah, it should last for a little while, and then it goes away. It’s not worth it. You can’t do it. You can’t listen to those voices. What you’re doing is you’re planting seeds. And seeds may start out small, but the important thing is that you protect them. And then you give them a chance. What’s especially interesting as you get better and better at the skill, you need less and less a sense of self in order to do it. Because the obstacles grow fewer. It’s in a sport when they say that the sportsperson, the athlete, is in a zone where everything seems to click and go just right. There’s very little sense of self there, because it’s not running into anything. It’s there, but it fades into the background. And the Buddha is taking advantage of this as you approach your mind in this way. So you learn how to look at it simply as events, rather than as you in a world in the mind, or you in the world outside. These are just events, cause and effect. And you begin to see that even in the state of concentration there’s going to be some stress, there’s going to be some disturbance. And you think about that determination for truth and determination for calm. You use your discernment to figure out what needs to be let go. For the sake of truth, for the sake of calm. Those determinations are interesting. They function both as means and as ends, particularly the determination for truth and calm. You let those be your guiding examples. So when a state of mind comes up, you ask yourself, “Is this something I can truly rely on? Is there any disturbance here?” If you can detect the disturbance, you realize that you’ve kind of dropped something, kind of relinquished something. You have to discern what the problem is. So you’re working with all those determinations. And finally, you get to the point where even the best state of concentration you can master, you realize, has its drawbacks, because you have to keep it going. That’s the disturbance. You have to keep fabricating it. That’s the disturbance. And for the sake of truth and the sake of calm, you let go. And that’s how the skill leads beyond it, to something that’s not fabricated. You realize that you, whatever sense you do have of yourself, talking to yourself, or putting up images in the mind, perceptions in the mind, you begin to ask yourself, “Who’s talking to whom?” in here? And these messages that are being sent with the different perceptions, who’s sending them? Who’s receiving them? Why does it have to be a sender and a receiver? Why is the mind divided like this? So you begin to look askance at these fabrications and any potential for becoming that you might develop around them. When you drop them, and there’s nothing being fabricated, you realize these are the fabrications that are creating your sense of the present moment. When they’ve been dropped, something else appears that’s not in time or space at all. And you’re able to get there, because the idea of self, or things that you have to hold on to, gets weaker and weaker. You’re just interested in the skill. How to find truth, something that is not deceptive, how to find calm, the ultimate calm. You use your discernment, you use your powers of relinquishment, but even they are just ulterior means. You let them go. These are some of the reasons why the Buddha has you work on this skill. To become more sensitive to your actions, become more sensitive, particularly to actions in the mind. The fact that you’re doing something good makes it easy to be open and above board with yourself. And although it requires building a healthy sense of self to begin with, the sense of self begins to get more and more attenuated as you go on. So you’re looking simply at actions, cause and effect. And when you see that an action is causing stress, disturbance, it’s easy to let it go when you’re looking on those terms. To begin to see even your sense of self as an action, built up around these mental and verbal fabrications. And that way it’s a lot easier to let go of your attachments, your clinging. And that’s how this skill leads beyond itself. So it’s a good skill to master. We’re fortunate we have the time. Just make sure that you maintain the inclination and that strong sense of values that this is really worth it. Because there is nothing better than what this skill can accomplish. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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