For Your Good & the Good of Others

March 13, 2018

Close your eyes and watch your breath. All the way in, all the way out, try to make your awareness of the breath as continuous as possible. And think about smoothing out any roughness in the breath. See how the breath feels good all the way in. All the way out, it can provide a good place for the mind to settle down and have a sense of well-being. We come to a quiet place like this to engage in this practice. Not so that we can stay in a quiet place all the time, but so that we have a skill to take out with us. And that’s something they have in national parks. Take one of their memories. When you leave here, take more than just a memory. Take a skill. Because the skill is good not only for you but also for the people around you. All too often we find ourselves in difficult situations. And we can make a mess of those situations if we’re trying to feed off them. The mind is hungry for things to be this way and to be that way. And they don’t go the way we want. We can create a lot of trouble because our desires get in the way. But to have a good sense of well-being that you can carry around inside. It’s like food. When you’ve got good food inside, you don’t have to go stealing food from anyone else. When you’re not trying to feed off a situation outside, you can actually see it a lot more. You can see a lot more clearly what needs to be done. Otherwise, our sense of what we are and what we want gets in the way. There’s an interesting passage where Sariputta comes out after days of meditation. He tells the monks, “You know, I was thinking today, is there anything in the world whose change would get my mind upset? And I couldn’t think of anything. I’d be there.” And he said, “Well, what if anything happened to the Buddha? Wouldn’t that give you sorrow?” And Sariputta said, “Well, no, I think it’s a sad thing that such a useful person for the world had to pass away. But that would be it.” And Ananda had an interesting response. “It’s a sign you have no conceit. It’s the ‘I am, I am’ in situations like that that can create a lot of trouble.” And there’s less of that. Then you can see what needs to be done. In other words, for too many of us, the issue of grief is all about “me.” We’re losing someone else, but it’s the “me” that’s the big issue. If you can take the “me” out, then you can start thinking about the other person. I saw this distinction really clearly when Ajaan Foong passed away. He had illness, and you can tell that he was not afraid of dying. And so when his death came, there was nothing about him to be sorry about. He realized, “Whatever sorrow there was, was all about me.” And that lesson has stayed with me ever since. When there are difficult situations, it’s good that you have food outside of the situation. So you can see the situation clearly, see what needs to be done, what really would be a way of extending goodwill, acting in a way that increases the happiness of others or helps them find happiness more easily. In other words, you get yourself out of the picture. Not by effacing yourself entirely, but by having an alternative source of well-being. Otherwise, you suffer from what Kurt Vonnegut called samaritrophia, where you try to help, help, help, and then you just run out of energy. You burn out. So, for the good of the people around you, meditate. Try to get a sense of what it’s like to have the breath filling the body, and a sense of well-being filling the body as well, and learning how to maintain that. Here then, when you get up, try to maintain that balance of being aware of the world outside at the same time that you are fully aware of the energy in the body. The greater the sense of fullness, the more consistent the sense of fullness, the more it’s going to impress itself on you that this is something really valuable. It’s something that you want to maintain in all situations. So learn how to appreciate it now. All too many people don’t have a sense of the breath energy in the body. The body, as far as they’re concerned, is just a piece of matter, what the Buddha would call the earth element. There’s the solid, there’s a little bit of liquid, there’s the blood flowing through it. But for most people, that’s pretty much it. If you can learn how to see the sense of the body as you feel it from the inside, as a form of energy. Because actually, when you get down to it, that’s what it is to begin with. And then we place a shape on it, and we notice other things about it, and we add that to our sense of the body. But our initial impression of the body is of energy. Try to get back to that level of immediate impression, and look at the various sensations in the body as aspects of the breath. In some parts, some of the breath energy will be still, and in other parts it’ll be moving. If it feels blocked, tight, it’s a sign that it’s not good breath energy. You can make a change in it. If you see the body simply as a hunk of matter, there’s not much you can do about feelings of blockage. But if you realize it’s energy, energy can be teased out, straightened out. So work with it. Take an interest in what’s going on inside here. Because, again, it’s good for you, it’s good for the people around you, and it gives you a good foundation for insight. This is how we develop our discernment, realizing that there are resources inside that we haven’t developed. And so instead of going out and laying claim on things outside, we try to fix up what we’ve got inside. In John Lee’s images of having a piece of land that you haven’t developed, and you go planting things in somebody else’s property, there’s bound to be issues. But if you develop your own land, then you have more food. And sometimes more food than you can eat yourself, you can share it with other people. So realize you’ve got this resource here. You’ve got this potential right here. You’re sitting with the potential for well-being. It’s simply a matter of exploring that potential so you can make the most use of it. And that’s where other thoughts come in. Use what discernment you have to deal with them. When I was staying with the Chan Fuang, there was one point where he said, “Use your paññā.” That was back in the days when I thought paññā was best translated as wisdom. I said, “I don’t have any paññā. That’s why I’m here trying to meditate.” He said, “No, everybody has paññā to some extent.” It made me realize, okay, wisdom is not the translation, at least not in his sense. And the more I got to stay with him, the more I realized it really was a quality of discernment on the one hand and also ingenuity on the other. Finding potentials that are harmless and right nearby. Seeing things that you didn’t see before. That’s the discernment part. And then coming up with solutions to problems. One is recognizing that the problem is there, and two, coming up with a solution, giving it a try. Those are two qualities that we have to develop all the way through the practice. It’s not the case that you get your concentration perfect and then you start thinking about discernment. To get the concentration going requires some discernment, realizing that this is better than the mind’s normal preoccupations. That involves some discernment right there. And seeing that you don’t have to go following every thought that comes up randomly in the mind. The Buddha has some discernment he can loan to you. In other words, all there in the text. His insights and inconsistencies. Not me, stress, not self. Learn how to use them, even before these insights arise spontaneously in your own meditation. Sometimes as you go through life, borrow the Buddha’s wisdom, borrow the Buddha’s discernment. It’s not just wise sayings, but he’s got techniques, he’s got strategies for dealing with all the different ways the mind creates suffering. So think strategically. As you get the mind to settle down, once the mind has settled down, learn how to use that settled-down mind in a strategic way as well. It has lots of uses as you go through the world. Because it’s not just still. It’s still with a sense of well-being. Pleasure when you need pleasure. Rapture even when you need rapture. The essentials are right here, and they’re to be used. The Buddha says the middle way is the middle between the two extremes of self-torment and sensual pleasure. He’s not saying it’s a middling feeling of neutral, okay. It can actually be a very strong sense of well-being as you get the concentration going. It’s middle in the sense that it actually doesn’t lie on the continuum between torture and sensual pleasure. It lies off the continuum entirely. A pleasure that’s good for the mind is a pleasure that’s good for other people, too. They may not be able to taste it directly, but when your mind is well-fed, as I said, it’s not going to run nibbling on other people. So learn how to make use of these potentials you’ve got. They’re there, and it’s simply a matter of using your discernment to develop them and get the most out of them.

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