Inner Leadership

April 3, 2019

We like to hear that we can relax our way to awakening and simply allow the mind to be its natural self, and it will naturally go there. That’s what we like to hear. But the Buddha never used any images of relaxing in the practice. And the same holds true for the four senses. The images of relaxation are of people developing skills, people in a battle, people in a search, looking for something that they lack. Which means that the practice is going to involve a fair amount of fighting and strategic thinking, working toward a goal. In this fight, who are the enemies? Our own laziness, our own heedlessness. Those members of the committee that tend to take over, bully their way around, deny that our actions make any difference, so we can just do what we want, going for the quick pleasure as opposed to the long-term happiness. There are two ways you can battle these people, these members of the committee in the mind. One is just trying to beat them out, and the other is trying to convert them. When we work with the breath, we’re doing the second method primarily, trying to give the mind a sense of pleasure right here, right now, in the way that you breathe. What the lazier members actually see is that this practice of meditation is pretty good. Once they want a quick fix, a quick pleasure, well, here’s a pleasure right here. Just simply by the way you breathe, you can develop a sense of well-being inside. When you do this, you’re basically reclaiming your breath and putting it on the side of the members of the committee that are more mindful, more discerning. The ones who look for long-term welfare and happiness. That, the Buddha said, that question, “What, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” He said that lies at the beginning of wisdom. Of course, it’s paired with the question, “What, when I do, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” Those two questions together are meant to make you heedful, to realize that your actions do make a difference. So those are the voices you want to have. You’re in charge. This heedfulness is based on conviction, that our actions really do make that difference. There’s no way you can prove that you have free will. Philosophers can dispute about this all they want, but you have to ask yourself, if you don’t believe in free will, what kind of options are you leaving for yourself? Nothing much. But if you take the assumption of free will, that means you will tend to be more careful about your actions. That’s paired with the belief that your actions do have results, and the capacity of the human mind is such that it can actually find true happiness through its actions. This is why conviction is the beginning of what they call the faculties, the qualities that the Buddha says we should have in charge in this committee that we have. Conviction in the Buddha’s awakening means basically conviction in our power of action. And you want to hold to that, and you want to remember that, because it’s all so easy to forget when greed comes on really strongly, or anger, or lust, or fear. Belief in karma tends to go out the window when you simply want to do whatever the emotion tells you to do, or you feel compelled to do whatever the emotion tells you to do, without much concern about the long-term consequences. Remember back around 9/11, all these Buddhist teachers were jumping on the bandwagon saying, “Well, we’re not pacifists.” All those teachings about how animosity is not still through animosity, we forget about those for the time being because we’ve got some really pressing issues right now. That’s what all the defilements say, “Our issues are pressing. Don’t worry about the long-term. Do what we tell you now. This is a special case.” It’s all a bunch of lies. But they get their power, probably because they hijack the breath. The way you breathe is going to have an impact on how you feel the body, and how you feel the body is going to have an impact on those times when you feel you’ve just got to get something out of your system. So we take hold of the breath to remind ourselves that the long-term really does count. This is one of the reasons why the precepts are so short. They’re easy to remember. It’s when you’re really tempted to kill that you need to remember the precept not to kill. When you’re tempted to steal, when you’re tempted to say, “Society’s falling apart. I need to eat. Who cares about ownership?” In a case like this, well, the precepts still hold. And they’re short, so they’re easy to remember. The basic principle of karma is easy to remember. You do things based on unskillful intentions, and they’re going to have harmful results. Sometimes now, sometimes you don’t see the results so quickly, but they will have harmful results. So why put anything harmful into the system to begin with? Well, you already have enough suffering in the world, as it is why you add more. This, of course, requires that you get your priorities straight, remembering that your actions are your true treasures. And the things you could gain by acting in unskillful ways are not treasures at all. They just slip through your fingers like water. Whereas your actions follow you around. In the Buddha’s image, your unskillful actions are like a cart that you’re dragging behind you. Whereas your skillful actions are like a shadow that follows you, with no weight at all. You don’t even have to carry it. It follows you without you even having to think about it. So we want some way to make sure that we’re making sure that the wiser members of the committee have some power, so we try to get the breath on their side. So the mind has these associations that you work for the long-term well-being, and it’s going to be good for you. It feels good to do it. Because there will come times in life when it’s going to be hard to find a comfortable breath. When you’re really sick, when the body’s about to die, the breath is not going to be a comfortable place to stay. But hopefully by that time the mind has been trained, the wiser committee members have been made stronger, so you’ve got some good breathing available to you to make the most of it. So see how many members of the committee you can convert. So the voices of mindfulness, right effort, concentration, discernment, they can all be in charge. These are the strengths, or the faculties they call them, that follow on conviction. If you really do believe in the principle of karma, you have to work to make sure that you give rise to skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. And you want to make sure that this work that you’re doing is not something you just feel forced to do. You have to learn how to make yourself want to do it. This is why when we try to get the mind to settle down, it doesn’t automatically settle down. You have to talk it into wanting to settle down. You provide it with a good breath, but you also have to provide it with good reasons. The two working together can finally get the mind to be willing, “Okay, it’ll be okay to settle down.” And you feel good about it as a result. Then you have to keep that in mind so that the next time you meditate, you remember, “Okay, even though it may be difficult and there may be a lot of back and forth as the committee is debating, you can remind yourself that when you finally did get the mind to be willing to focus on the breath, it felt really good, and you came out feeling really refreshed. And you want to remember all the different tricks that you’ve used that worked, and all the different tricks that the defilements use against you, so that you can recognize that they are not your voices. They’re just other voices in the committee. This, the Buddha said, is the sign of wisdom. You’re able to see things in the mind as separate. We hear so much about the wisdom of oneness and interconnectedness, but when the Buddha talked about wisdom, he said it’s a matter of seeing things as separate. Events come up in the mind and you have to look at them with some objectivity. Step back so you can see where they’re coming from, where they’re going. It helps to have the mind in concentration to be able to see that. So when these qualities are working together—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—then you’ve got the right committee members in charge. But with any kind of politics, it’s good to have some tricks up your sleeve, because the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion have got plenty of tricks. They’ll lie to you, they’ll make you forget, they’ll seize your breath. So you’ve got to have the conviction that can see through the lies. You’re going to need the mindfulness to make sure you don’t forget. And the concentration that can work with the breath, so that it’s on your side and it’s supporting the right people inside. As with any group, it’s always best to have the wise members in charge. And especially when things get difficult. You look at world history and it’s always sad to see that when some countries are facing difficult situations, the people in charge just do really stupid things. When some wisdom is most needed, that seems to be when it’s most lacking. And for a lot of people, aging, illness, and death come, and that’s when their wisdom starts lacking. They just grab at anything. So you want to strengthen the good committee members so that when the strength of the body begins to fail, the strength of the mind will be there. And the habits you’ve developed in terms of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment will give you the leadership you need in order to do the right thing, the wise thing that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. So make these qualities the leaders of the committee, the leaders in your mind. And however much effort is required to give them strength and to keep them in charge, it’s effort well spent.

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