The Karma of Meditation

September 7, 2019

Get your body in position. In other words, your back straight, your hands in your lap, face forward, and close your eyes. Get your mind in position. We’ve actually started that already with the chants. There’s a reflection on aging, illness, and death, separation. You realize that you could sit here thinking about things out in the world, but everything you would think about would be subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. Whereas in the meditation we’re hoping to find something that’s not subject to those things. That’s what that fifth reflection is for. If we want to find true happiness, it’s going to have to come through what we do. We are heirs to our actions. In the Buddha’s comment, the Buddha talks about things being not-self, but then when it gets to your intentions, your actions right now, he says, “We’re the owners of our actions.” In other words, the reflection on not-self is for things we should let go of. But the reflection on the fact that we do own our intentions points us to areas where we should be very careful and hold on to the idea that we want to do something really skillful with our actions, because we do have this potential. As the Buddha said, some actions are bright. In other words, they lead to good results in life. In other words, some actions are dark. They lead to bad results in the world. Some actions are both bright and dark. They lead to mixed results in the world. But then there’s the action that is neither bright nor dark, and leads to the end of action, that goes beyond the world. That’s what we can do as we meditate. We can become owners of that kind of action. We can create it within ourselves. That’s what we’re doing as we get the mind into position. So that’s the kind of thinking that should lead the mind right here. Because if everything depends on our actions, where are you going to watch your actions? Everything depends on your intentions. Where are you going to watch them? You watch them right here. When we start out, it’s hard to focus directly on the mind, so we focus on something that’s right next to us. That’s the breath. So take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. When we use the word “breath” here, it’s not so much the air coming in and out from the lungs. It’s more the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and out. If that movement weren’t happening, there’d be no air moving. So ask yourself, where do you feel that movement? Some people feel it most prominently in the chest, others in the shoulders, others in the stomach. Wherever you feel the movement of energy, it lets you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Focus your attention there. That’s getting the mind in position. It’s not all that hard. The hard part is keeping it in position. That involves two things. You want to be focused on the breath in and of itself. Don’t let the mind wander off to other frames of reference right now. Just the sensation of breathing right here, right now. As the Buddha said, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That means any thoughts that have to do with the world right now. Just let them go. There will be thoughts coming up in the mind that are not related to the breath. But you don’t have to enter into them. You don’t have to get involved with them. You’re not responsible for them right now. But you do have to keep reminding yourself that that’s not where you want to go. That’s one of the reasons, again, why we have those reflections at the very beginning. You go into thoughts of the world, you go into the area of aging, illness, and death. Whereas the present moment, if you pay attention here, can open you up to another possibility entirely. Now, to stay here requires three qualities. The first one is mindfulness, remembering to stay here. You’ve learned already to stay here. Just keep that in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. The second quality is alertness. Watch what you’re doing. In particular, keep an eye on the mind. Even though the main focus is the breath, you want to make sure the mind isn’t getting ready to slip off the breath. It will send little signals. For the most part, we don’t see those signals, because we’re used to following them without thought. But now we’re going to put up some resistance. That resistance is the quality of ardency. You want to really do your best to stay here and really do your best not to go wandering off. So that’s what we’re doing to keep the mind in position. You want to use your discernment as well. The first thing you want to discern is what kind of breathing feels good. If you’re going to force the mind to stay with the breath, at the very least you can make the breath comfortable. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing does the body need right now?” Deep, shallow, heavy, light. It’s good to start with some long deep in-and-out breaths, just to energize the body. Because in the course of the hour, things will begin to calm down. And if you start out very calm and with very gentle breathing, it’s very easy to drift off. So give the body some energy, give the mind some energy with deep breathing. And then when you feel like you’ve had enough, then you can let the breath find whatever rhythm or texture feels right. Keep in mind that that may change what feels right. So you want to be on top of it. If the breathing gets mechanical, it gets uninteresting, and then the mind begins to drift. But if you can ask yourself, “What allows me to see what the body needs right now? What are the signs that the breath is too long or too short?” Remind yourself of the advantages of having healthy breathing in the body, allowing the breath energy to not only flow where it’s obvious, but thinking of it flowing in other parts of the body too, once it gets comfortable. So if there’s any tension or tightness in different parts of the body, you can breathe right through it. When there’s that sense of ease, allow it to spread, and see if you can keep it all through the body as much as possible. The range of your awareness may have a tendency to shrink. So again, use your mindfulness. Remind yourself to stay right here, full body, full body, all the way in, full body, all the way out. And try not to squeeze the breath, especially at the end of the in-breath or the out-breath. There is that tendency. You’re trying to make sure now you know the breath is coming in, now you know the breath is going out. You’re trying to make a clear demarcation. But that doesn’t allow a sense of fullness to grow. You’re cutting it off each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Think of it as the ebb and flow of the tide. The tide comes in, and after a while you begin to realize, “Oh, it’s beginning to go out. There was a point there where it was stable.” There’s no clear demarcation. And as you try not to squeeze the breath energy, a sense of fullness can come. Let that spread, too. But even with a sense of fullness, a sense of ease, you don’t want to forget about the breath. Otherwise, you begin to drift off. And you don’t want your range or awareness to shrink. That’s another reason why you drift off. Because the mind does have that tendency, as the breath gets comfortable, to look and think, “Oh, now is a nice time to sort of drift off and go to sleep.” So as the Buddha said, you can’t let yourself get overwhelmed. You can’t be overcome by the pleasure or the ease. Remind yourself there’s work to be done. Mindful, ardent, alert. Stay with the breath. The other extreme, of course, is when the mind has too much energy. Its thinking is popping around like a ping pong ball, just bouncing here, bouncing there. In a case like that, remind yourself you don’t have to follow the thinking. They’re thoughts that come up in the mind simply from the power of past karma. But you have the choice in the present moment whether to go with them or not. This is where the principle of karma applies to the meditation. As the Buddha said, the present moment is shaped partly by your past karma. It’s shaped partly by your past actions, but more deeply by your present decisions. Which means that you do have some freedom here right now. If you didn’t have any freedom, there’d be no point in meditating. We do have some freedom of choice, and the meditation actually helps you to maximize that and get the best use out of it. So if a thought comes up in the mind, remind yourself, “I don’t have to get interested in that. I don’t have to be involved in that.” In the same way that you’re hearing the sound of the crickets right now, you don’t have to get involved in the sound of the crickets. They’re there. You’re not trying to blot them out. But they’re not the object of your attention. The object of your attention is the breath. The same with your thoughts. Think of them as crazy people coming to talk to you. Crazy people are all excited about the world. Thinking about the past, thinking about the future, thinking that if you think about those kinds of things, it’ll be good use of your time. And you have to remind yourself, “No, I’m going to try to find something new in my life.” The kind of insight, the kind of understanding that comes from staying in the present moment. Because those thoughts are like movies. And you have the choice. You go into a movie theater, you can sit and watch the screen and then get sucked into the movie. Or you can go sit off to the side of the theater and look across. What you see is a band of light coming from the projector and people sitting in the theater laughing and crying. Over what? Flashes of color on the screen. In other words, as you get into the present moment, you begin to see the processes of the mind as they create thoughts. And you see how jerry-rigged they are, how arbitrary. And you can gain a sense of dispassion if you go into the thoughts that become very real, very important. If you look at the process, it’s hard to take them quite so seriously. This is one of the advantages of staying in the present moment, because you can watch these things as processes, as they’re happening. And if the mind gets tricked into slipping in again, you can see, “Well, why was it tricked? What did it fall for?” This allows you to gain some more control over how you engage with your mind. The actions you choose to do, the actions you choose not to do, can become a lot clearer and you can understand why certain things are skillful and why certain things are not. This is the beginning of that karma that leads to the end of karma. You see how you’re creating karma right here, right now, in your choices, because you see the processes in action. So there’s a lot to observe here. Some people watch the breath for a while and then they get bored. It’s because they’re not really looking. They don’t realize the different potentials of the breath, and they also don’t realize what it’s possible to observe about the mind as you stay with the breath. This quality of alertness becomes very important as the meditation develops, as you see what you’re doing, what the results are, and you begin to see why you’re doing these things. You see more and more clearly when the results are good and when the results are not. Then you can take that knowledge and apply it again. This is why we get the body and the mind into position, because we’re in the right position to see through the ways the mind deceives itself. The mind tries to lure you into its movies, and you see how you can pull yourself out. When you’re no longer so attracted to your own movies, you begin to wonder about other people’s movies and why you play along with theirs. This frees you from a lot of influences from outside that otherwise could be harmful, because you begin to see which things other people are doing that are skillful or not. This way you protect yourself both inside and out. When you get into position here, you’re putting yourself in a safe place, a strong place, a wide open and very clear place for using the powers of your action to find a happiness that you can really depend on, something that won’t let you down.

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