Interfering with Old Habits (outdoors)

September 15, 2019

We suffer because we don’t know what we’re doing. We act in ignorance, speak in ignorance, think in ignorance. The problem is not so much that our actions are wrong or our words are wrong or our thoughts are wrong. It’s that we don’t know the process of how we create these things. This is why we meditate, to become more sensitive to these processes. In the Panic or Arising, the Buddha traces things down to fabrications which are conditioned by ignorance. The word “fabrications” here doesn’t simply mean things that are put together. There are intentional actions in the present moment. You’d think that because the actions are intentional, we’d know them. But often our intentions are buried deep in the mind. Sometimes someone will ask you, “Why did you do that?” and you have to stop and think. Something came out seemingly automatically. And that’s dangerous, because, as the Buddha pointed out, whether you’re really alert to those intentions or not, you’re still going to suffer the consequences if they’re unskillful. So you’ve got to be really careful. As we meditate, we take care. One of those fabrications is the breath. It shapes our experience of the body. So take care in how you breathe. Notice when the breath comes in, where do you picture it coming in? That’s another kind of fabrication. That’s perception, which is a mental fabrication. And then you talk to yourself about all this. That’s verbal fabrication. And the way you breathe is going to give rise to feelings. That’s another mental fabrication. So if you’re paying attention to what you’re doing as you breathe, and how the mind is relating to the breath, you’ve got your bases covered. So be very deliberate in how you breathe, very deliberate in how you talk about the breath to yourself, and how you imagine the breath to yourself. This is why when the Buddha defines alertness, which is one of the factors of mindfulness that gets the mind into concentration, it’s always a matter of being alert to what you’re doing. We know we’re supposed to be here in the present moment. Sometimes, though, we get the idea that mindfulness means being aware of just anything in the present moment at all. But it really means being alert to what you’re doing, because after all, that’s the problem. And that’s going to be the solution. So notice how you relate to the breath. Where do you focus? And how does your focus have an impact on the movement of the breath through the body? If the focus is too light, everything slips away. If it’s too intense, you start disturbing the flow of that breath energy in the body, which may be okay for a while, but after a while it gets oppressive. And where do you focus? You may have a favorite spot to focus, but there are different places to focus. The places you focus in the body will have a different impact on the kind of concentration you develop, so it’s good to move the focus around every now and then. Try focusing down around the navel for one session, say, as you go through the day. Another session in the middle of the chest. Another session at the base of the throat. Another in the middle of the head. There are a few things to watch out for here. If you tend to get headaches or have nervous disease, stay out of the head. If you find yourself getting drowsy, stay away from the stomach. Those are only the main focal points. There are other focal points you can try as well. I used to find that when I had migraines, focusing down in the lower back, releasing tension down there helped a lot. Other times, focus on my hands and my feet. Just to get the pressure away from the head. If you have a pain in a particular part of the body, try focusing on the opposite side. Because sometimes the pain comes from the fact that that part of the body is doing too much work, and the opposite side is not doing enough work. So you want to check for that. Then, of course, there’s the rhythm and texture of the breathing. Those are things you can play with as well. If you don’t play with these things, you don’t know the extent to which you’re fabricating them. Things seem to be just going along naturally, on their own. It’s only when you begin to question the “on their own” that you begin to realize how fabricated it is, and where your habits tend to be. This is why the Buddha, when he taught breath meditation, didn’t say, “Well, just be with whatever breathing comes up.” He said, “Breathe in certain ways intentionally, deliberately, carefully.” What he didn’t say was, “See it was just in which ways the body seems to resist, and the mind seems to resist.” But those are the lessons you’re going to learn. He says to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. The word “rapture” here can also mean “refreshment.” John Lee likes to translate it as a sense of fullness. One way to induce a sense of fullness by the way you breathe is to make sure you don’t squeeze the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath. You may say to yourself, “I don’t squeeze it.” Well, watch. Be very deliberate in not allowing any pressure to come at the end of the out-breath or the end of the in-breath. You don’t have to make any marker at all to say, “Now the tide is coming in, now the tide is going out.” You’ll notice that when you do it deliberately, it is different from when you don’t do it deliberately. We have this fear sometimes of being deliberate in things that should be natural. But remember, what does “natural” mean? It means simply “habitual.” When something is habit and you take it for granted, it goes in. It goes into ignorance, and it can be a source of suffering. So it’s by questioning things inside the body, questioning things inside the mind, that you overcome your ignorance. It’s the same as when you overcome your uncertainty about things. When the Buddha lists the way to overcome uncertainty, it’s not just saying, “I’m going to make up my mind to believe.” He says, “You look into the mind and ask yourself which qualities in the mind are skillful and which ones are not.” In other words, you ask questions and you discern differences. This is an important point to understand. Sometimes we hear that wisdom or discernment lies in seeing the oneness or interconnectedness of all things. But actually, the Buddha says that to really discern something, you have to see it as something separate. And it’s not going to be separate unless you question it. That’s how the Buddha himself gained awakening, by seeing deeper and deeper into the fact that he was doing things in an habitual way, in an accustomed way. He took it for granted that that was the way things had to be, and finally realized he couldn’t take it for granted. He had to question it. So this is how you stay alert. You’re deliberate about what you do. When you make up your mind, you’re going to do things with an intention that’s clear and continuous, and you’re going to learn about the mind to see where it resists or where you’re changing things. So you can bring these subconscious intentions up to the surface, where you can examine the mind and see, “Are they really skillful? Are they the kinds of things you want to follow through with or not?” This covers all the different kinds of fabrication—the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the way you image things in the mind, the feelings you focus on, the way you feel. There are a lot of choices being made here all the time. Yet out of our desire to focus on something outside, we put all those choices into a blind area so they don’t distract us. So when they’re in a blind area, they can do all kinds of mischief. So don’t change your values. It’s the things outside that are the distractions, and the processes going on inside the mind. Those are the things you want to bring up to the surface, you want to spotlight. And it’s in this way that you end the ignorance that leads to suffering, the suffering that’s being created by the way you process things all the time. And it ends when you finally realize you don’t have to do it that way. There are alternatives, but you have to see that you are making choices, and the choices are not skillful, but you have the opportunity to make other choices. It’s from taking advantage of that opportunity that you learn about the mind. So it can stop churning out suffering, and churn out happiness instead.

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