In Control of Your Thoughts

September 21, 2019

The Chant just now stated that aging, illness, death are unavoidable. But it doesn’t say that suffering is unavoidable. These things happen, but we don’t have to suffer from them. That was the message of the Buddha’s teachings from his very first talk to his very last. These things happen. Aging happens. Illness happens. Death happens. It happens to all of us. But we suffer from these things because of our craving. In other words, we suffer because of the mind. This is why we’re training the mind right now. It’s how we think about things that makes us suffer. We have to think in a good way. Some people think that meditation means not thinking at all. And there are stages where there’s a very minimal amount of thinking. But as the Buddha said, you want to train the mind so that when you need to think, when you want to think, you will. And when you don’t want to think, you don’t have to. The things we suffer from are the thoughts that we don’t want, the thoughts that take over. These are mental states that take over. Greed for this, anger about that, delusion about this. These things take over our minds. And they can take us to places that are pretty bad. And so when they come up, we want to learn how to stop thinking and direct the mind in a different direction. So be mindful. Like right now, you want to think about the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Focus your attention there. And then ask yourself, “Is the breath comfortable?” If you like long breathing, stick with it. If it feels laborious, you can change. No one’s forcing you to breathe in any particular way. It’s simply a matter of your observing on your own what feels good right now. For the mind to settle down in the present moment, it has to settle down with a sense of well-being, a sense that it belongs here. So get to know your breath. The breath is the bodily fabrication, as the Buddha calls it. It shapes our experience of the body. We don’t pay too much attention to it, for the most part. We figure the breath can come in and out on its own, so we don’t have to worry about it. We can pay attention to other things. But the breath can have a huge impact on the body, and through the body it can have an impact on the mind. So it’s good to take time and get to know it, get familiar with it. Learn how to read the needs of the body right now. Does it need shallow breathing? Does it need deep breathing? How about heavy or light? Fast? Slow? If you’re not sure, watch for a while. You’ve got a whole hour to get to know this aspect of your awareness, this aspect of the body, and to see what impact it can have on the mind. When the breath starts feeling comfortable, think about the breath energy in the body, going down the nerves, going down the blood vessels, so that the sense of well-being that comes from the breath can saturate the whole body. How do you find these things out? Well, you direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate what’s going on. But you talk to yourself about this. And that’s what we need to do. We need to learn how to talk to ourselves in new ways. So here’s an exercise in talking to yourself about the breath in such a way that you can create a sense of well-being. The well-being can actually get very intense. You put down your concerns about your work. You put down your concerns about school, if you’re going to school, concerns about your family, concerns about anything outside. And pay full attention to the mind and the breath in the present moment. And the fact that you can put those other things down, that’s a great relief for the mind right there. Just be careful that you don’t pick them up again. So one way to avoid that is to get really interested in what the breath can do. And this way you’re learning to train your inner conversation. And you learn something about the potentials of the body. Because everywhere you go, the breath is there. You don’t have to be sitting here with your eyes closed. You can still be aware of the breath. Adjust the breath so it really is helpful. Helpful to the body, helpful to the mind. You want to learn this as a skill. Because training your mind in this way helps you when the unavoidable happens, when aging comes. Some people talk to themselves about their aging in ways that make them really miserable. When illness comes, people talk to themselves about their illness in ways that make them miserable. When death approaches, they get all out of control. And as the Buddha pointed out, the suffering is not so much in the aging and the illness and the death, it’s in the craving and other mental processes around them. In other words, it’s what your mind does, what the mind says to itself, where it focuses, what it latches onto. That’s where the suffering is going to come from. So if you can train the mind, as the Buddha said, to think when you want it to think and not think about things you don’t want it to think about, you can avoid a lot of suffering. We’ve seen people who seem to have everything that you can imagine in terms of wealth, beauty, power, influence, and yet they’re miserable. Other people have the same wealth, beauty, power, and influence, and they’re happy. Similarly with poverty. Some people are very poor and miserable. Other people are very poor and happy. What’s the difference? The difference is in their minds, how they talk to themselves. So the real sources of the suffering that weighs down the mind, as the Buddha pointed out, are within the mind itself. He made a comparison. He said it’s like rust. The rust comes out of the iron, and then the rust eats the iron away. So when you’re finding the mind weighed down by things, ask yourself, “What is the mind itself doing to weigh itself down?” And when you learn this skill about how to stay with the breath, put down your other thoughts. You’re getting some control over the mind, so that when you begin to notice that it’s wandering off in ways that are not really helpful, that are oppressive, you can pull it back. You can direct it in directions that are actually more helpful. Because here it is, the force in our life that’s shaping our life more than anything else, the intentions of the mind. And yet if they’re out of control, that means your life is out of control. It’s like giving your car over to a crazy person. You have no idea where the crazy person is going to drive, how he’s going to drive, what he’s going to run into. And people who don’t train their minds are like people who will continue to give the keys over to the crazy person every time. When you make up your mind to train the mind, that’s when you’re taking the keys back. “This is my car. I want to be the one who’s making the decisions about where it’s going to go.” So right now you’re developing qualities of mindfulness, in other words, the ability to keep something in mind. Watching what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting, and ardency, the desire to do this really well. The more you develop these qualities, the more you can depend on them. When the Buddha talks about taking the Dhamma as a refuge, it’s these qualities that create the refuge. So when aging comes, you don’t have to make yourself suffer over aging. When illness comes, you don’t have to make yourself suffer over illness. When death comes, even though the mind has to leave the body, it doesn’t have to suffer. It’s got these qualities that it can depend on. So try to strengthen them here. Apply them to this task, this task of the mind. It’s this skill of learning how to think when you want to think and not think when you don’t want to think. And when you are thinking, learn how to think things that really are useful, helpful, rather than thoughts that destroy yourself. There’s an awful lot of our thinking that is self-destructive. And it’s good to learn how to turn it off. Or, in the Buddha’s image, it’s like being an irrigator. You learn which channel to open so the water goes where you want it to go, and which one to close so it doesn’t go where you don’t want it. So direct your mind to think about things that are helpful, and learn how to say no to the thoughts that would make you miserable. And get really good at this skill. This is going to be your lifesaver. Because as death approaches, the body is going to get a lot weaker. You want your mind to be strong. Otherwise, as it realizes it has to leave the body, it’s just going to grab onto any thought that comes by. Either that, or you’re going to ask the doctors to shoot you full of painkillers. And here it is, an important moment in your life where lots of decisions are going to be made, and you’re asking the doctor to make yourself bleary. So the mind tends to wander off wherever, at the very moment when you want to have the most control over it. So learn how to breathe in a way that minimizes whatever pains there are in the body. And get the mind focused more and more precisely right here in the present moment, thinking about things that are helpful, putting away thoughts that are not. You want to have your wits about you at that time. So in preparation, try to have your wits about you right now. In the image of the Ajahns, you want to be the boss of your thoughts. You don’t want your thoughts to boss you around. And so to be a good boss, you’ve got to be mindful, alert, and ardent. And have a very clear sense of what kind of thinking is helpful and what kind of thinking is not. That way you can face the unavoidable with a lot of confidence, because you’ve learned the skill of how to avoid suffering. The suffering that the mind causes itself, and that’s the only suffering that really weighs the mind down. When you’ve got that covered, you’re safe.

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