An Honorable Training

October 3, 2019

We focus the mind on the breath to bring it to a state of concentration. But for the time being, don’t think about concentration. Just think about the breath. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Focus your attention there. Then try to keep tabs on the breath. All the way in, all the way out. And try to become more sensitive to how long the breath should be, what feels good for the body right now. Sometimes short breathing feels good, sometimes long. Sometimes in long, out short, especially when the body needs to be energized. Sometimes in short, out long, when you need to relax. Take an interest in the breath. After all, it is the force of life. Without the breath, this body would be, as they say, a senseless log, just lying on the ground. But it’s because of the breath that we can move it around, do things with it. So it only stands to reason that if the breath feels good, it’s going to be good for the body, it’s going to be good for the mind. And as you notice the feeling of breathing in the body, you begin to notice other energy flows in the body as well. In fact, when you get really sensitive, you can sense the energy everywhere in the body. And you try to connect it with the breath so that the different energy flows are not conflicting with one another. And the body seems to be one unified whole. That’s when the mind gets into concentration. Not thinking about concentration, but thinking about the breath. But it’s important to realize that concentration is only one part of the training that we do here. The Buddha identifies three aspects to the training. Concentration is the one in the middle. The first one is training in what he calls heightened virtue. The last is heightened discernment. Heightened in the sense that you try to really be deliberate about how you live your life and how you think, how you look at things, looking for a way to conduct your life so that it’s harmless. You’re not placing any unnecessary burdens on people. And so you try to live in an honorable way that requires strength inside, strength of character, and requires a lot of good attitudes. The Buddha says that the first sign of a good person is gratitude. You have gratitude to your parents, gratitude to your teachers, everyone who’s given you benefits, anyone who’s been your benefactor. The Buddha emphasizes very strongly gratitude to parents. As he says, they introduce you to the world. They teach you a language. They teach you how to walk. They get you started in life. When you start out, you’re totally helpless. They look after your every need. Everything you have in life is dependent on them. And if you don’t feel gratitude toward that, the Buddha said, it’s hard to consider you a good person. Because the fact that you have gratitude means you appreciate goodness in other people. If you don’t appreciate goodness in other people, it’s hard to be good yourself. So gratitude is one of the attitudes you bring to the practice. Another is goodwill. You want all beings to be happy. You’re realizing that some forms of happiness conflict with others. But true happiness is going to be something that comes from within, from developing potentials that you have in the mind and the heart. Which means that your true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with others. But you’re also realizing that happiness doesn’t come simply from wishing it for others. If you want to be happy, you have to understand the causes for true happiness, the qualities you have to develop inside, and be willing and able to act on that knowledge. When you have goodwill for others, you wish the same for them. May they know how to bring about true happiness and be willing and able to do it. That’s an attitude you can have toward anybody, no matter how they’ve behaved in the past. And you need this attitude if you’re going to want to make sure that your actions, your words, your thoughts, are not going to be unskillful. When somebody else misbehaves and you figure that that’s your license to misbehave as well, that becomes your stain on your own character. So you want to be able to develop goodwill for everybody, no matter how they behave, realizing that you’re not simply endorsing their bad behavior. You’re wishing that they might change. And if there’s anything you can do to help them change in a positive direction, you’re happy to do it. Generosity is another character. The Buddha says it’s good for virtue. You actually think of virtue as a form of a gift. You’re giving safety to other beings. And you want to be able to give safety to all beings. You’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal, you’re not going to have illicit sex, you’re not going to tell lies, you’re not going to get intoxicated. And in following these precepts in every situation, with regard to everybody, you provide safety for everyone. And then you have a share in that safety. So this is why you have to have goodwill for everybody. At the same time, have an attitude of generosity. If you have something good, you’re willing to share. If you don’t, try to keep all your goodness to yourself. Which means that you think about the consequences of your actions as they have an impact on other people. And you don’t want to burden them with unnecessary burdens. When you have these attitudes, it strengthens your virtue. And it puts the mind in a position where it doesn’t have any regrets. You look back on your behavior. You haven’t harmed anybody. You haven’t harmed yourself, you haven’t harmed other people. It makes it really easy for the mind to settle down. If, when you’re trying to get the mind quiet, you start thinking about times when you’ve harmed other people, it’s like a wound in the mind. There are two kinds of wounds. There’s the wound that’s still an open wound and is very sensitive. And then there’s the wound that’s hardened over. And then you go over with the denial that you didn’t do anything wrong or they weren’t really hurt. It doesn’t matter what happens to them when you start thinking in those ways. The mind starts putting up walls inside, things it doesn’t admit to itself. And if you’re going to get any training in discernment, you can’t put up those walls inside. Because the whole purpose of getting the mind still and concentrated is so you see the actions of the mind in a lot more detail. Then you begin to realize there are things you do that cause suffering. Some of that suffering spills out on other people, but you see it primarily in the added stress and burdensomeness that the mind places on itself. You look at this because the Buddha sets out a pattern called the Four Noble Truths. He says that suffering is caused by your own craving and ignorance. And if you learn some dispassion for that craving, you can put an end to the suffering. And the end of the suffering can be total. This is why you want to live your life very deliberately. So you can look at your outside actions and see clearly where you’re causing burdensomeness. And then you can turn around and look at your inside actions. And keeping in mind the possibility, it is possible to act in such a way that the mind can find a release. That’s what the triple training is for. It leads to release, a state in which you’re placing no burdens on anybody. The mind is at peace. The mind finds happiness. Now we do this and keep this in mind. Even though most of us have never seen anything like that, we keep in mind the possibility. There was one time when the Buddha was talking to a group of people who were not yet willing to commit themselves to any particular teaching. And he said, “You hear some people say that nirvana, release, is impossible, and other people say it’s possible. But if you take as your working hypothesis, that it cannot be done, then you’re going to be closing off all kinds of possibilities. The possibility of real peace, the possibility of being harmless, totally harmless. Whereas if you accept release, nirvana, as a true possibility, you open up those possibilities. And there’s a path of practice that can take you there. And even if it turns out that what the Buddha taught, and what all the great noble disciples have taught, that it’s not possible, at least you’ve lived your life in an honorable way. You’ve set a high goal for yourself. You’ve set a high standard. And try to act in line with that. Think about the Buddha when he first left home. Everybody told him that a deathless happiness, a happiness that’s free from aging, illness, and death, free from harm. It was an impossibility. He might as well not try, just to content himself with things as they were. But his attitude was,”That’s not an honorable way to live.” The irony, of course, is that nowadays people say that Buddhism is all about just accepting things as they are and not trying to make anything any different. Just learning how to be at peace with whatever. Which is the total opposite of his attitude. Because an honorable life is one that’s spent trying to find something that is totally harmless, totally at peace, totally free from conditions. And as the reports tell us, and as the noble disciples who’ve lived in every generation since then have confirmed, the Buddha really did find that deathless happiness. He was able to come home. He taught the people who had doubted him. He was able to teach his parents, his wife, his son, lots of his relatives. And then from there it spread out. He was able to teach a lot of other people as well. His was a noble life, an honorable life. And that’s the nature of this training. It’s an honorable training. Training in harmlessness. Not harming others, training in not harming yourself, and trying to be deliberate enough so that you can find an absolute state of non-harm, which also happens to be a state of great freedom and great happiness. So that’s what the training is all about. There are three aspects. So it’s important that you realize that. You have to realize that this training and concentration is the center of the training. And John Lee gives an analogy. It’s just like building a bridge across a river. The posts on this bank and the posts on that bank are not that difficult. It’s the posts in the middle that are going to be hard to get in place. The post on this bank, he says, is virtue. The posts on the other bank are discernment. The posts for concentration require that you force the mind. If it wanders off, you just keep bringing it back, bringing it back. Try to develop an interest in the topic of your concentration. But once those middle posts are really firm, then you’ve got a safe bridge across. So it’s good to keep the whole bridge in mind. And work on the posts that most need working. They all need some work, but the concentration is going to require the most.

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