Square One

June 13, 2022

Every time you meditate, it’s good to make a survey first of what you’ve got here. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing, then you’ve got the mind thinking and aware. You want to be able to bring those things together. It’s like putting two pieces of wood together. First you’ve got to survey what you’ve got to see if they really will fit. Look at the breath. How is the breath flowing? Does it feel comfortable? If it doesn’t, you can change. If you’re not sure, you can experiment with different kinds of breathing. If you notice any pains in the body, don’t focus there. Focus on the parts that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. And as you do this, you’ll be able to get a sense, too, of how the mind is approaching the meditation. Some days it’s discouraged. It doesn’t think that things are going to go well. Some days it’s overconfident that things will go well. You’ve got to bring it into balance. If you’re worried about the future or concerned about the past, you’ve got to think in ways that make you realize how important it is to be right here. After all, the past is gone. There’s nothing you can do about it. As for the future, you don’t really know what’s going to happen, but you do know that you’re going to need qualities of alertness, mindfulness, and discernment. So instead of trying to plan, “If this happens, I’m going to do this, and if that happens, I’m going to do that,” just tell yourself, “You’ll need to be able to think quickly on your feet.” And that requires these qualities. How are you going to get those qualities? By being right here and developing them right here, right now. So in other words, bring the mind into balance right here. If its energy level is low, think of what you can do to bring it up. This may have to do with the different ways you breathe. There are energizing breaths and there are calming breaths. What do you need right now? If the mind is feeling wired, try to breathe in a way that’s calming. If it’s a little bit drowsy, breathe in a way that’s more energizing—long in, short out. Or if you find the mind just simply will not stay with the breath, as the Buddha describes it as having a fever in the body or a fever in the mind, you just want to settle down. Ask yourself, “What kind of good Dhamma theme would you like to think about right now?” Because the whole point of concentration is that you give the mind something that it likes to be with and is happy to be here. If, for the time being, you’re not happy to be with the breath, you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Think about your virtue. In other words, the times in the past when you could have broken the precepts but you didn’t. The times when you were generous, above and beyond people’s expectations. In other words, have a clear idea of what the mind would like to think about right now, what would be good for it. And then when it begins to calm down, then you can bring it back to the breath. As for your anticipations, we read so much about what the meditation is going to be like that when it doesn’t fit in with our anticipations, we get frustrated. This can either be because it doesn’t fit in with what we read, or it doesn’t fit in with experiences we’ve actually had in the past. Remember, this is a teaching that revolves around cause and effect. When the Buddha gave his shortest explanation of what he learned on the night of his awakening, it was a principle of cause and effect. Cause and effect basically comes down to the fact that your experience right now is shaped by results of past actions, and also the present actions and the results of present actions. There’s not much you can do about past actions, but you can change what you’re doing right now. And you’re not going to get the results of present actions unless you do what you want. You’re going to do the proper actions right here, right now. So no matter how good things were in the past, they’re not here anymore. Whether it’s simply out of impatience that you want things to go back to where they were, or the problem is that the mind and the body are not in the same conditions that were the last time over really well. You’ve got to put your memories of the past aside. I may have told you before about that story about the Chinese Templings. The monastery where we lived had a road that went in front of it. And every now and then you’d get these traveling salesmen coming through with their trucks loaded in the back with whatever wares they were trying to sell. There was a guy who sold water jars. There was a guy who sold salt. One of our most frequent visitors was the guy who sold Chinese Templings. You’d drive over the hill off in the distance and you could hear him speaking over his loudspeaker. He seemed a little bit drunk, but his constant refrain was, “Today’s Templings aren’t better than yesterday’s.” And the next couple of days later, “Today’s Templings aren’t better than yesterday’s.” It kept getting better and better and better. And you wondered how good Chinese Templings could get. But then someone pointed out to me, “Well, where are yesterday’s Chinese Templings? If they’re not down in your intestines, they’re down in the cesspool.” So yes, today’s Templings are better than yesterday’s. So no matter how good your meditation was in the past, it’s a memory now. And you’re not going to get back there simply by focusing on the memory. You’ve got to focus on the causes. Keep the breath in mind. Be alert to how the breath is right now. Be alert to how the mind is right now. And then do what you can to bring everything into balance. Remember, it’s like putting two pieces of wood together. Does the breath need to be adjusted to the mind? Does the mind need to be adjusted to the breath? Take time to take stock. We are putting forth effort here, but we can’t do it with impatience. All too often we think of patience as meaning that you simply put up with whatever, but here it means doing what has to be done and realizing that sometimes the results will take a while. But you still stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. And you’re willing to be painstaking in how you approach this. I had a friend one time whose mother was working on a quilt. The quilt had been started by her grandmother and then left unfinished. So she decided to finish it. And as she inspected the quilt, she realized that the stitches were extremely close, much closer than they really had to be. That kind of stitching takes a lot of time. But at the same time, when she was going to finish the quilt, she didn’t want it to be obvious where she had taken over and where the grandmother had left off. So she decided to do the very fine stitching, even though it was going to take a lot longer. That’s what we mean by patience. Some jobs require time and a lot of attention. Meditation is one of them, because through bringing the mind under control, the most complex thing in the world is your mind. So just because something worked yesterday doesn’t mean it’s going to work today. And that doesn’t mean it’s going to be totally useless from now on, but simply you have to file that away in your list of possible approaches and possible ways of dealing with the mind. I’ll be open to the idea that, given that the mind will change so much and the body will change so much from one day to the next, that you’re going to have a whole knapsack full of your tools. And if you’re really going to understand the mind, you have to realize that it’s going to have its quirks from one day to the next. So be patient with it. Do all the steps. Remember, this is based on cause and effect. So if you want the effects, go back and start with square one. No matter how many times you meditate, always start with square one. We’re just surveying the body, surveying the mind, and then getting a sense of how things fit together as you try to get the mind to stay with the breath. And then learn how to read what’s happening as it does or does not stay with the breath. As the Buddha said, if you can’t read the minds of others, be sure at the very least that you know how to read your own mind. And then when you’ve read it, then you can figure out what needs to be done.

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