Forever Be Well? (outdoors)

October 9, 2022

Okay, let’s meditate. Close your eyes. Be sensitive to the breath. Sometimes we say to watch the breath, but it makes it seem like you’re in one part of the body watching the breath in another part of the body. Well, actually the breath fills the whole body. Your awareness fills the whole body. So be sensitive to the breath. That’s a better way of saying it. So take a couple of good, long, deep in and out breaths. And notice where it’s most prominent in the body, the sensation of the breathing. Be especially sensitive there. And then ask yourself, does long breathing feel good? If it feels refreshing, keep it up. If it feels laborious, you can make it shorter. Or in long, out short. In short, out long. Heavy, light, fast, slow. Deep, shallow. Experiment to see what rhythm and texture of breathing feels best for the body right now. If there are any pains in the body, you don’t have to pay them any attention. It’s the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. But at the same time, don’t leave the breath and just wallow in the comfort. It’s like having a job and earning a wage. People without much foresight get a job to get their first paycheck, and then they leave, spend the money. Then when the money’s all gone, then they come back and ask for the job back. It would be a very kind boss to take them back. But even the kindest of bosses probably would not give them a raise. It’s the same way with the breath. If you wallow in the breath, you lose your foundation, you lose your focus. It may be pleasant for a while, but then you’re either out of concentration entirely, or you go into what’s called delusion concentration, where you stay with a sense of comfort, but it’s not very clear where you are. What this means is you don’t want to get waylaid either by the pleasures or the pains you encounter as you’re sitting here. This is an important principle. We live in the human world, and yet we have that chat every day at the end of the chatting session. It’s a nice sentiment. But what does it mean? Does it mean that you never experience anything unpleasant? Well, no. The nature of the human world is that there are good things mixed together with the bad things. For your mind to be well, it has to learn how not to get upset by the bad things and not get carried away by the good ones. And that takes skill. That’s the skill of the meditation, basically. Sometimes we have the chant, “I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me.” While the world is swept away, it does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. And then we end with, “May I be happy.” And it’s not that we’re going to wish away aging, illness, and death, or wish away the uncertainties of life. We have to train the mind so that it’s not touched by those things. That’s the essence of the Buddha’s skill, the skill that he teaches us. And, as you said, when negative things come up, if the mind has been trained, then you hardly feel them. You know they’re there. It’s not that you’re blanked out. It’s simply that the mind has the discernment it needs to make a separation. The pain, the unpleasantness is in one place. Your awareness is something else. And even though they may seem to be in the same place, they’re actually separate. When you can master that skill, then you can forever be well. And what goes into that skill? First, the Buddha says, “Try to train your mind to be unlimited.” He makes a comparison with a lump of salt. You take a large lump of salt and you put it in a small cup of water. You can’t drink the water because it’s too salty. But if you throw it into a river of clean water, you can still drink the water because the water is so much greater than the salt. In the same way, you try to expand your mind, with thoughts of goodwill for everybody, with no exceptions at all. This is something that requires training, because the mind does feel goodwill, but it tends to be partial here on our human level. It’s easy to have goodwill for people who are good to us or good to people we love. It’s easy to have ill will for people who are bad to us or to people we love. But you have to realize what’s gained by ill will. You want to see somebody else suffer. You may say, “Well, they deserve it.” But is that going to stop their unskillful behavior? In many cases, not. In fact, there are many cases where the more people are experiencing pain, the more they lash out at other people. They can’t see the connection between their own actions and the pain that they’re experiencing, so they blame others. The right attitude to have is, “May all beings understand the causes for true happiness.” “Be willing and able to act on them.” That should be an idea or a thought that you can have for everybody, even people who have been extraordinarily cruel. What it means is that they will see the error of their ways and change. If they can do that voluntarily, that’s a lot more solid and a lot more reliable than being forced through punishments or through suffering. They see the results of their actions. So ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there for whom you can’t have that sentiment?” “May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” There may be a few people, but again, you have to ask yourself, “What would be gained by their suffering?” When you realize that nobody would gain anything anywhere, then it’s a lot easier to put those thoughts aside than to expand your goodwill. So it encompasses everybody. Because you’re extending goodwill largely for your own protection, the more expansive your mind, the larger your perspective, the smaller the pains you encounter in the world, in your own life. And the more trustworthy you are. If you have goodwill for everybody, then you can trust yourself that you’re not going to behave in ways that are going to harm them. It’s goodwill that is your protection. So that when unpleasant things happen in the world, they seem a lot smaller. They don’t loom quite so large. One of the images they give in the Canon is of making your mind like earth. A puny little man comes along with a basket and a hoe. He’s going to make the earth be without earth. He digs here and he digs there and he spits here and he spits there and he urinates here and he urinates there. He’s never going to succeed because the earth is so much larger than his efforts can possibly be. So think of your goodwill as being large like the earth. The unskillful things that other people do, the harsh, cruel things that other people do, won’t have such an impact on your mind. This doesn’t mean that you’re going to try to change circumstances when people are being cruel, but you’re in a better position to decide what really would be the best thing to do right now, rather than simply reacting through anger or ill will. And if you’re coming from goodwill, even for people who are misbehaving, it’s a lot easier to solve a problem. The same goes with the rest of the Brahma-viharas, they call them. Unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. Unlimited compassion is when you see beings suffering, no matter who they are, no matter what they’ve done, you feel compassion for them. When you see people who are happy, you’re happy for them. And don’t resent their happiness, because there are a lot of people out there who find happiness and then they abuse it. And for that, you have to have compassion. And finally, there’s equanimity. As I said, beings in the world are all going to choose their courses of action. No matter how much you want people to behave in skillful ways, you can’t get them all to behave in skillful ways. The world resists anybody’s idea of perfection. So there are bound to be cases where you simply can’t help people. You have to accept that so that you can focus your attention on areas where you can be of help. Equanimity of a doctor. The ideal doctor sees that there are some cases that he or she can cure. But the doctor doesn’t just give up. The good doctor focuses on areas where at the very least you can alleviate some suffering, alleviate some pain, make the disease less overwhelming. And it comes from a combination of goodwill and equanimity. So it’s not the case that as you develop equanimity you abandon your goodwill. They’re all there so that you don’t suffer from your goodwill and you don’t get complacent or indifferent from your equanimity. That’s one way of training the mind so that it doesn’t have to suffer so much from the negative things in the world. Dealing with pleasure, training and dealing with pain. As I indicated at the beginning, as you sit down here, there are going to be pains in the body, but there are also going to be pleasant sensations in the body too. What we will have to learn how to do is not let either of those invade the mind and remain. In other words, we can be with pleasure, we can be with pain, but we don’t get overcome by them. For instance, where there are pains in the body, you focus instead on the parts of the body that can be made comfortable by the way you breathe. And remember here, breath is not air coming in and out of the lungs so much as it is a feeling of energy flow that goes through the body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. And there’s an energy field in the body that’s there even as you’re in between breaths. We think of making the breath comfortable and then thinking of that good, comfortable breath energy spreading through the area where there’s a pain. You stay focused on the area that’s comfortable, but you radiate that sense of comfort out. Have it permeate the pain and then go out. If the pain is in the leg, think of it going down the leg and not the toes. If it’s in the arm, think of it going down the arm and not the fingers. If it’s in the torso, you can think of it going either through the arms or the legs. If it’s in the head, think of it radiating out from the ears and the eyes. In other words, instead of being afraid of the pain, you’re trying to use the sense of ease to see if you can alleviate it. Now, some pains will actually go away when you think of the breath going through them. Others don’t go away, but at the very least you’re not sitting there being the victim of the pain. You’re taking a more proactive attitude. That’s one way of learning how not to be overcome by pain. As for not being overcome by pleasure, there will become stronger and stronger feelings of pleasure as you get the mind to settle down. As I said earlier, you can’t let yourself lose your focus. Try to stay with the breath. It’s always the breath coming in, the breath going out. Even when the breath seems still, it’s still breath. But don’t go focusing on the pleasure. If you do focus on the pleasure, it’s like wrapping yourself up in a huge cloud. Things get very blurry. Your mindfulness begins to grow weak. That’s how we normally fall asleep. It’s going for a feeling of pleasure and then settling in. Here you want to maintain your alertness as you do that. So the practice of concentration helps you train yourself so that you’re not so easily overcome by pleasures and not so easily overcome by pains. You should realize that you have skills with which you can deal with these things so you don’t feel attacked by the pain. And the pleasure doesn’t erode your mindfulness and alertness away. On top of that, the Buddha recommends developing yourself in virtue. This means holding to the precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. When you learn some restraint in these areas, then it’s a lot easier to restrain the mind when pain comes. When difficult situations arise in life, you learn to hold the mind back from simply following its preferences and thinking in the long term about what the consequences of your actions would be. When you look back on your past actions, you realize you haven’t harmed anybody at all. So that gives you more strength to deal with difficulties as they come. Finally, the Buddha recommends developing discernment, which means seeing exactly where you’re suffering and why. We tend to blame our sufferings on situations outside. This person did that, that person did this, the economy did that, politicians did this, and maybe they really did do negative things. But the reason you’re suffering is not because of the negative things they did. It’s because you’re clinging to certain things and not being willing to let go. So the cause of suffering is within. Suffering itself is the clinging. We cling because we crave. We crave sensual pleasures. Even more than sensual pleasures, we crave the ability to fantasize about sensual pleasures. Think about a meal. It doesn’t take all that long to eat a meal, but you can anticipate the meal, you can reflect back on it, and in the anticipation and the reflection, many times, it’s better than it actually was. That’s what we’re really attached to. There’s craving for becoming, wanting to take on an identity in the world of experience. You have a desire. If you think about what you desire, then a sense of the world in which that object could be found appears, and then you enter into a role in that world. Again, you can fantasize about these kinds of things for hours on end. And these are our causes of suffering. You may think that you want to destroy a world that you’ve inhabited, but in the desire to destroy the world, there’s a sense of you who wants it to be destroyed. So that turns into another level of becoming. So these are the things that cause us to suffer. When you realize that, then you work on what it is that gives rise to the clinging, gives rise to the craving, inside the mind. And as you focus on that problem, you find you’re suffering a lot less, even if you haven’t reached the end of the problem. The fact that you are taking a proactive approach to it puts you on the noble path. You’re not just following your clingings and cravings. You’re learning to step back from them. You learn how to disidentify yourself from them. Realizing that just because a desire comes up in the mind, you don’t have to go with it. You don’t have to say, “This is what I really want.” Because a lot of desires are pretty random. So as you develop your discernment, you begin to realize the solution to the problem of suffering is not trying to straighten out the world and make it perfect, because, as I said, it’s just being made perfect. And all too often, it ends up being a problem of everybody trying to impose their ideas of perfection on everybody else. In which case, there never would be an end to suffering. The real end to suffering is when you can identify the actual suffering inside and the causes of suffering inside. And those are things that are within your power to do something about. And even if you haven’t been able to abandon all your clinging and cravings, the fact that you’re taking a different approach to them now, you don’t identify with them quite so quickly, means that when negative things come up in the world, you’re not suffering so much. So this is the nature of the Buddhist skill, realizing that we live in an imperfect world. We can still learn how not to suffer in spite of the imperfections. It’s a skill that requires that each of us take responsibility for ourselves. But it also guarantees that we have it within our power, so no matter what happens, we don’t have to suffer. We can find a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody at all. It doesn’t harm ourselves. It doesn’t harm other people. And in doing so, we benefit, and the people around us benefit, too. At the very least, we’re not imposing difficulties on them. At the same time, we can act as an example that it is possible to find happiness. And you can do it in a way that’s actually noble and honorable. That’s a message we don’t hear too much in this world, but it’s the message that the Buddha left behind 2,600 years ago. And it can still reverberate in our hearts.

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