Attention to What’s Ordinary (outdoors)

December 18, 2022

In the Buddha listed the most important internal quality for gaining awakening, he called it appropriate attention. Appropriate attention is defined basically as looking at what you’re doing right here, right now. He explains it in two ways. One is that you look to make sure that what you’re doing is skillful and anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you abandon it, let it go. The other way is thinking in terms of the four noble truths. If you find that the unskillful thing you’re doing is causing suffering, then you abandon that unskillful thing. But that also requires that you comprehend the suffering, exactly what is the suffering. As for things that are helping you to escape from suffering, basically the path, that’s something you develop so that you can realize the cessation of suffering for yourself. These are all things you do right here, right now, which is why we’re sitting here meditating, because our actions come out of the mind. So if you’re going to solve a problem, you solve it where the source is. If we were suffering because of climate change, suffering because of the society, suffering because of the economy, we’d have to go out and do what we can to fight those things, change them to be more in line with our likes, more conducive to what we see as our happiness. But try as we might to fix the world. The world doesn’t want to stay affixed. It keeps changing. There are other ideas out there that differ from your ideas about how the world should be fixed, which is why if you’re trying to solve the problem of suffering outside, it would be impossible to come to any final solution that would satisfy everybody. But as the Buddha said, the real problem of our suffering is inside. Things outside may be really bad, but if we can solve the problem of how we create suffering right here, right now, we don’t have to suffer from those things outside. And we can stop adding to the suffering outside as well, which is why when we meditate we close our eyes, we look at our minds. And the best way to look at the mind is to give it something good to focus on here in the present. So you can observe. This is what the mind is like when it’s focused. This is what the mind is like when it’s losing its focus. This is what it’s like when it’s mindful and alert. This is what it’s like when mindfulness begins to get a little loose and shaky. Alertness gets blurred. It’s for this reason that instead of focusing on the mind directly, we focus first on the breath. Watch the breath coming in, watch the breath going out. Sensitive to the fact that the reason the air is coming in and out through the nose is because of the breath element in the body. When the Buddha talks about the in-and-out breath, he doesn’t classify it as a tactile sensation. He classifies it as one of the properties of the body itself. And you notice as you breathe in that it’s the energy in the body that brings the breath in. And that energy seems to be spreading from different parts of the body. So find any one spot where it’s obvious that the breath is spreading. And then try to relax around that. So there’s nothing to get in the way of the spread as it flows through the body. In other words, give the mind something to get interested in here in the present moment so that it’s more willing to stay. Because for the most part, when the mind looks at the present moment, it doesn’t see anything. Everything seems normal, everything seems ordinary. And so we go out and try to create other worlds that are more interesting. But the issue is that what seems ordinary, what seems normal right here, is actually how we create suffering. It’s something normal. Our minds lack skill in how we deal with our sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. So we’re trying to see what it is about normal that is causing suffering. To see that, first you’ve got to get the mind really still, with a sense of well-being. Some people are afraid to get the mind into concentration for fear of that well-being. They’re afraid of getting stuck on the pleasure. But the Buddha said this is actually part of the path. This kind of pleasure is not like the pleasure of the senses. The pleasures of the senses often involve karma. You have to arrange things to be like this, arrange things to be like that. They’re not like this, they’re not like that. Sometimes you end up doing unskillful things to make them be the way you want them. And the pleasures themselves are not that satisfying, so we have to dress them up. And dressing them up, of course, means lying to ourselves, which means we’re getting intoxicated. Simply from sitting here breathing and finding a way of allowing the breath energy to fill the body with a sense of well-being. It involves no karma with anybody outside at all. And it’s an immediate inside pleasure that you don’t have to dress up that much. It helps you see clearly. It forms the basis for insight into the movements of the mind. Because as you get the mind still here, you’re basically following the instructions for right mindfulness, which are to keep track of some aspect of the body in and of itself, like the breath. And then you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Those are basically instructions for concentration, staying focused with one thing and letting affairs of the world fall away. You want to inhabit this world right here, i.e., the world of your body, the world of your inner awareness. That allows you to see how the mind moves in the present moment. Sometimes you can see it clearly while you’re sitting here. As the mind begins to get ready to leave, sometimes it’ll make a little decision. Somebody in the corporation has decided that when the chairman of the corporation is not paying attention, they’re going to steal some money. But then they pretend like they haven’t made that decision. The corporation chairman comes down and looks around. Everybody’s behaving well. But then the chairman’s attention gets diverted someplace else and the employees can go ahead and cheat the corporation. It’s the same way with the mind. Part of the mind will decide, “Okay, enough of this breath. I’m going to go someplace else.” And then it will act as if it hadn’t made that decision. But it’s looking for an opportunity when your mindfulness lapses. If you can catch that, you’ll begin to see that the mind really is good at lying to itself. And there’s part of the mind that likes to be lied to. You can see that clearly as you’re meditating here. Another way is when you get up from the meditation, don’t leave the breath. As you walk around, try to maintain a sense of being scented with the breath. And then notice which parts of the mind tend to run out after sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. Sometimes the running out is perfectly innocent. Sometimes a little bit of greed goes along, a little bit of anger goes along. This, as I said, is normal. This is ordinary. But you want to see into what’s ordinary. You want to see exactly where these things hide from you, where they fool you. When you can see anger going out, or sometimes just a little bit of irritation or a little bit of attraction from greed or lust, you ask yourself, “Why would I want to go with that? What’s the allure? What’s the appeal?” It’ll take a while to see because, again, the mind likes to lie to itself about its desires. But when you see, “Oh, this is what I get out of it, but it’s not much.” It’s like those people who keep giving in to an addiction only when there’s a sense of a little bit of tiredness in the body and they say, “Oh, I need something to pick me up.” It’s not much of a sensation, but they’ve learned how to use it as a trigger. The same way with our thoughts of lust. There’s not that much satisfaction that we can get out of them. But we dress them up and we allow them to trigger us. And when you see that the drawbacks that come along with that are not worth it, that’s when you let go. Now, you wouldn’t see this if you didn’t have a clear center for the mind. It’s like knowing the currents of a river. If you’re just sitting in a boat, sometimes you can’t tell which way the currents are because the boat just goes along with whatever comes. But if you put down an anchor, you can feel the boat pulling against the anchor and you can see which direction it’s pulling. Then you know the currents. So as you go through the day, try to have this sense of center and you’ll see the movements of the mind a lot more clearly. This is where you see that in this ordinary state of mind, all the steps that lead up to suffering are right there. But if you bring knowledge to them, you can turn a lot of those things into the path. Your perceptions, your thought fabrications, they can become part of concentration. They can become part of your right view. So this is how we play appropriate attention. We look at what we’re doing, develop what needs to be developed so that we can see clearly how the mind moves. Where it’s moving innocently, where it’s moving in ways that are not so innocent. That’s when we can figure out how to solve this problem of suffering that we create for ourselves in our ordinary, everyday lives, again and again and again. It may not seem like much suffering, but there’s a lot of stress we create for ourselves. I knew a journalist one time in Bangkok who asked me, “Why do the Buddhists talk about suffering?” I said, “I don’t have any suffering in my life.” I asked him, “Do you have any stress?” He said, “Oh yeah, lots of stress.” So that’s it. And again, it’s not coming from people outside or the economy or things outside. It’s coming from within. So the place to pay attention is within, right here, right now. If you can solve the problem right here, right now, then no matter what karma you have coming in from the past, you don’t have to suffer from it, no matter what happens coming from outside, which is basically your old karma coming back at you. You don’t have to suffer from that either. So focus where the cause of the problem is, because right there, i.e., right here, right now, is where the problem can be solved.

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