The Projector

January 29, 2023

The Pali word for meditation is bhavana, which means to develop. You’re trying to develop good qualities in the mind. But if you were to take the mind, you would know exactly where to catch hold of it. It’s not like a puppy. You can catch hold of the puppy by the name. Put it on a leash. Make it do this, make it do that. Where do you catch hold of the mind? We give it something to focus on. In this case we’re going to focus on the breath. Try to notice where you feel the breath when it comes in, where do you feel it when it goes out. And the word “breath” here doesn’t mean the air coming in and out through the nose. But it means the mind. It’s the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and out. That’s connected with other levels of energy in the body. So you’re focusing on the energy in the body right now. As you breathe in, where does the energy seem clearest? Focus your attention there. And then adjust your focus so that it’s not clamping down too hard. At the same time it’s not too light. The image they give in the Canon is of a person holding a baby quail. If you hold the baby quail too tightly in your hand, it’s going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So make sure your focus is just right. So the breath feels comfortable coming in, feels comfortable going out. You can adjust the rhythm of the breath too. Make it faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. Experiment for a while to see what kind of rhythm and texture of breathing feels good for your body right now. And take an interest in the breath. After all, this is the energy of the body that keeps you alive. If you breathe in a way that feels tight and constricted, it’s not going to be good for your health. At the same time you’re not providing a good place for the mind to stay in the present moment, because the mind likes pleasure. It likes ease. And if it feels dis-ease inside, it’s going to try to find pleasure outside. So give the mind a good place to stay, because you want it to watch itself here in the present moment. If it’s running around outside, it’s paying attention to other things. It’s a slide. In a slide projector, you shine a light through it and it casts a picture on the wall. And we spend all our time looking at the pictures on the wall, without looking at the slide itself. Who made the slide? Why is it that way? Is the slide good? If you try to straighten things out on the wall, you’re doing it at the wrong place. You have to turn around and look at what’s on the slide. That’s the mind here in the present moment creating these pictures of the past, pictures of the future, pictures of this place, that place, this person, that person. And it doesn’t just create pictures, it has emotions that go along with it. Here a better analogy would be with a movie. If you sit in a movie theater, staring at the screen, and there’s a movie playing on the screen, you find yourself getting excited, getting upset, feeling horror, feeling love for the characters, hatred for the characters, all kinds of emotions get stirred up. But then you go back and you look at the projector and it’s just a piece of film going through the projector. And you ask yourself, “Why get worked up about a piece of film?” That way you can avoid a lot of the needless ups and downs that the mind goes through. And you begin to see the source of a lot of these things isn’t really worth all the upset. So stay right here in the present moment. The breath is your anchor in the present moment, because if you’re going to try to focus on a future breath or a past breath, they’re not there. The only breath you can focus on is the present moment. The breath in the present. So that’s your guarantee that you’re right here. Then you can watch the mind as it creates stories. But here we’re going to ignore the stories for the time being. We’re going to try to stay right here with the breath. But eventually we will be getting to move our focus from the breath back to the mind focused on the breath, and the parts of the mind that are trying to move away from the breath. So you’re going to start understanding what’s going on in your own mind. But in the meantime, for the time being, you just want to stay right here focused on the breath. Any thoughts that wander away, just drop them. Any pains in the body, you don’t have to focus on them. Just focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. As you’re doing this, you’re developing lots of good qualities in the mind. There’s mindfulness, your ability to keep something in mind. Alertness, your ability to watch what you’re doing as you’re doing it. And also watching what results you’re getting from your actions. And then ardency, the desire to do this well. That’s when we try to make the breath comfortable, or if we notice the mind has slept off, we bring it right back. There will be parts of the mind that will say, “Well, here, have a whole hour to think about anything you want. Nobody’s going to be watching you.” That’s true. But you’re watching yourself. In fact, as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, you want to get something out of it. You want to benefit from it. And the only benefit is going to come if you really stick with this one object, get the mind so that it will do what you want it to do. Right now, what you want it to do is to stay right here. Learn this skill. Because the skills of meditation are not only good for sitting here with your eyes closed. As you go through the day, you want to be more mindful, you want to be more alert. You want to be ardent in doing your tasks of the day really well. You want these to become your normal habits. Because when we’re born into this world, there are a lot of things we don’t know about how our life is going to go. But we do know that there will be illness, there will be aging, there will be death. Once you’ve signed on to be born, that’s what’s going to follow. And most of us live our lives as if we don’t know. We put it out of our minds because we think, well, there’s nothing you can do about it. Or some people say, well, when death comes, you’re just going to surrender, allow it to happen. But the Buddha was saying, no. The choices you make as you go through life, and even the choices you make at the moment of death, are very important. So we want to learn how to make them well. So that at times when the body is suffering from illness, or you begin to get weak with age, or you get pain and weakness with the arrival of death, you want your mind to be strong. So it’s making good choices. You’re reminding yourself there are skills that you’ve learned in your meditation. And that’s the time to bring them out and use them. We talk about meditation as practice. Sometimes the question arises, well, what are you practicing for? And the answer is, we’re practicing so we can perform well at death. And in the time leading up to death, we can perform well. As we confront aging, we can perform well as we confront illness. Because we want to learn how to be with these inevitable things, but realize that suffering is not inevitable. If you have skill in the way you approach things, approach your feelings, approach your sense of the body, approach events in your mind, aging, illness, and death can happen, but you don’t have to suffer. You can see the things in the body and the mind that you encounter as you age, grow ill, and die, are one thing. But your awareness is something else. You want to have a strong sense of your awareness as being able to be separate from these things. All too often it’s all tied up in affairs of the body, thoughts going through the mind. But there’s a part of your awareness that’s not involved in these things, and you want to find that. That’s what we’re looking for as we meditate. We’re in the present moment, but it’s not the present moment. The present moment is the closest you’re going to get to it, as long as you’re in space and time. But this is something outside of space and time that we’re looking for. But the present moment is where the opening is. So try to give your full attention to this. Make sure the breath is comfortable so that you can stay here long periods of time with a sense of ease, so the mind isn’t hankering to go off someplace else. And then you’ll be able to look more and more carefully at what’s going on, to understand what’s going on inside your own mind. When the Buddha talks about ignorance, it’s not ignorance about things outside. It’s ignorance about our own minds, the ways in which we’re causing ourselves unnecessary suffering, and how we can learn how to put an end to that suffering. That’s what we’re looking to learn here. Learning how to stay with the breath is a good first step in getting to feel at home in the present moment. So you can be here with a sense of stability, with a sense of belonging. You get more and more familiar with what’s going on right here. So the mind goes flashing out with its pictures. You can say, “Well, the problem isn’t with the pictures on the wall or on the movie screen. Let’s go back and look at the projector.” Learn to understand who made the film, how it was made, and how you can make better and better films. We have more power in our minds than we take advantage of. There’s the power to learn how not to suffer. There’s the power to learn how to find something that goes beyond our ordinary confines of who we think we are. There’s a lot more in there than you might have thought. So don’t think of this as pinning the mind down in a place where nothing is happening. Everything is happening in the present moment. Our images of the past and the future, they’re just images. The real thing is right here. So pay full attention right here. If you want to know what’s really going on.

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