Basic Training

August 3, 2023

Get your body ready to meditate. Get your mind ready to meditate. With the body, sit up straight with your hands in your lap, face forward, close your eyes. Scan through the body to see if there’s any tension anywhere. Think of it relaxing in your wrists, elbows, shoulders, and your neck, down in your hips, your knees, your ankles, your toes. And then get your mind ready to meditate. Part of that is in the chants we did just now. You may have noticed the conflict on the one hand. We talked about how the world is swept away and does not endure. In other words, if you’re looking for true happiness in the world, you’re looking in the wrong place. And then we say, “May I be happy.” What actually encourages that desire for happiness is a happiness that’s true, that’s lasting, that doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm anybody else. And that has to be found inside by training the mind. In fact, that realization, he says, is a sign of a wise person. Realizing that if you want to find happiness, you’ve got to train the mind. Because you can have all kinds of good things out there in the world and still be miserable. Conversely, there are a lot of people in the world who are poor, live very frugally, don’t have much in terms of friends, in terms of wealth, status, but they can be perfectly happy. It’s because their minds are trained. So remind yourself, that’s why you’re here—to train your mind. When the Buddha taught his son meditation, the first thing he taught him was to make your mind like earth. People can throw trash on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react. They can pour perfume on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react. Now, this doesn’t mean you make yourself into a cloud of dirt or that you’re always going to be non-reactive. But it does mean that if you’re going to train the mind, you have to have a certain solidity inside, that you’re not going to be phased by what comes up. Because you’re trying to learn cause and effect in the mind. What can you do that will lead to genuine well-being? And what can you do that might lead to harm and pain? Sometimes you find that your habits are actually leading to harm and pain. Unless you’ve trained your mind to be non-reactive, you’re not going to want to see that. But tell yourself you’re here to learn. And to learn, you have to admit the truth of what’s going on in the mind. And also admit the fact that you can learn, you can change things inside. If we were simply stuck the way we were, there would have been no point in the Buddhist teaching anything. But it’s because we can change our habits, change the way we think, the way we talk, the way we act outside, that it’s worth training. Think thoughts of goodwill for yourself, thoughts of goodwill for all beings. Goodwill is basically the wish, “May I find true happiness. May I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” Then extend the same thought to others, people you know well, people you don’t know at all. And you’re not simply saying, “May you be happy however you’re acting or whatever you’re doing.” There are people out in the world who are doing some very unskillful things, and their wish is to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. In other words, change their ways. There are some people who will do that and other people who won’t, which is why you also have to develop equanimity towards situations that you can’t change, which means you’re learning how to be wise in the sense that you focus on things where you can make a difference. The primary place where you can make a difference is inside. So no matter what comes up in the meditation, you see the mind doing unskillful things or doing things that you don’t intend it to do, just realize that you can change. It may be old, habitual patterns, but you can change those patterns. And with those thoughts in mind, you’re ready to meditate. Focus on your breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel the breathing? Because when the Buddha is speaking about breath, he’s not speaking about the air coming in and out through the nose. He’s speaking about the energy flow in the body that allows the air to come in and go out. And that you can feel anywhere in the body. It can be in the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen. You can feel it in your shoulders. You can feel it in your head. Watch the body for a while and see where the sensation of breathing is most prominent, where it’s clearest. Then focus your attention there. The next step is to ask if it’s comfortable. Does it feel good breathing in? Does it feel good breathing out? Does the breath feel restricted in any way? If it does, can you think of it opening up? And if you’re not sure about what rhythm feels best, you can experiment. You can try longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Or you can simply pose the question in your mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” Breathe in and see how the body responds. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it until it doesn’t feel so good anymore. Because sometimes the knees of the body will change as you begin to settle down. And if you find the breath getting mechanical, ask yourself, “Would it feel good now?” Then the Buddha gives an analysis of what you have to do to keep the mind settled down like this. But sometimes it’s good not to pay attention to the analysis. Just tell yourself, “You’re here to focus on the breath.” So make yourself as interested in the breath as you can. Reflect on the fact that the breath is the force of life. And if the force of life feels constricted, unpleasant, it’s not going to be good for the body and it’s not going to be good for the mind. So it’s worth your while to explore for a while. What kind of breathing would feel good now? Usually our breathing gets shunted off to the side because we have other issues that we think are more important. But right now you have nothing else to do. So explore the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, you can think of it spreading to different parts of the body. Because as you get more and more sensitive, to the breathing process, you begin to realize that it’s not just a few muscles in the body that are engaged. The whole nervous system is engaged. And if you get very sensitive, you can feel the sensation of breathing all the way through the body. If thinking of all the body, all at once, is too much for you, you can go through the body section by section, starting with a place where you already are, then move either up or down. Some of the most prominent places you might want to explore are how does the breathing feel down around the navel? How does it feel in the solar plexus? How does it feel in the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head? How does it feel in your shoulders and arms? How does it feel going down the back, down the legs, down to the feet? As you try to focus on the breath like this, there’ll be two types of distractions. The first is pain. There may be pains in different parts of the body. And for the time being, you don’t have to pay them any mind. Focus your attention on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable through the way you breathe. Then just don’t lay claim to the parts where there are pains. John Lee, my teacher’s teacher, gives the analogy of going into a house. You will lie down on the floor, but some of the floorboards are rotten. Well, you don’t lie down on the rotten floorboards, you lie down on the good ones. It’s like eating a mango. If there’s a rotten spot in the mango, you don’t eat the rotten spot. Let the worms have it. You just eat the good part. It’s natural that the body will have some pains. And we can’t wait for the body to be perfect before we settle down. So focus on the areas that you can make comfortable. And when they feel consistently comfortable, that good breath energy flowing into the other parts of the body, going right through the pain as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Don’t let the pain form a wall. Think of the breath penetrating. Remind yourself, breath is energy. The solid parts of the body are made out of atoms that are mostly space. So the energy can go right through. If you find you have a tendency to tense up around any feelings of pain, let the breath go through that wall of tension. But if you find that the pain is getting so much that you can’t concentrate on the breath, then sit with it for a couple minutes and then shift your position. The other kind of distraction, of course, is distracting thoughts. The tendency of the mind, when it sees that there’s nothing much happening, is to tell itself, “Now you’ve got all this time to think about whatever you want.” Well, you’ve been thinking about all kinds of things for who knows how long. This is a time to learn a new skill, which is to get the mind quiet. Now, getting the mind quiet doesn’t mean you don’t think at all. After all, you are thinking about the breath. You’re asking questions about what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing doesn’t feel good. When it does feel good, how do you maintain it? And how do you let that sense of good breath energy spread? Those are useful things to think about because it’s thinking that helps get the mind more and more concentrated, more and more settled in. But other thoughts about anything else right now? They’re not your responsibility. And if they do come up, there are lots of different ways you can handle them. The first one is simply to notice. You wandered off, so you come right back. Don’t make a big deal out of it. Come back. Reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good so that you will learn how to feel more and more inclined to want to come back. But if the mind keeps going to a particular thought, then you can start analyzing it. See the drawbacks of thinking of that thought. You’re here to meditate and you’re thinking about who knows what. We can think about those things some other time. If you keep thinking about them, you’re wasting your time that could be better used meditating. If the mind says, “No, this thinking is more important, it’s more interesting, it’s more entertaining,” then you ask yourself, “If I continued thinking that thought for twenty-four hours, where would it take me?” Usually it’s a bunch of old movies. And you know how the movies come out. You’ve seen them many times before. So why bother? Here’s your opportunity to learn something new. The mind that has settled in. The mind that feels good settling in. So when you can convince yourself that those thoughts really are not where you want to go, then you come back. Now, they may be insistent. This is where you learn to think of them as being like a crazy person coming to talk to you. If you try to chase the crazy person away, the crazy person has got you. So even though you know the crazy person is there, you don’t pay him any attention. And he’ll say more and more outrageous things to grab your attention. You have to be insistent, “No, you’re not going to go there.” Because thinking is fed by your acts of attention. To make another comparison, it’s like a dog coming around to your house, wanting some food. And you know that if you give the dog food, it’s going to keep coming back. And it’s going to come back again and again and again. So you learn not to feed it. Just don’t pay it any attention. Don’t try to chase it away. If you try to chase it away, it’ll lead you down some dark alleys and who knows where you’re going to end up. Let the thinking be there, but you don’t have to get involved. Or if you can notice that when you’re thinking those thoughts, they’re going to be patterns of tension going through the body. Sometimes to keep a thought in mind, you have to tense up a certain part of the body as a marker. See if you can find where in the body is that marker and then breathe through it. Think of your breathing in and out as dissolving that marker away. Some of these methods work. Just grit your teeth, put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” This is where it’s useful to have a meditation word that you repeat in your mind. A standard one is bhutto. It’s a title of the Buddha. It means “awake.” Just repeat it really fast, machine gun fast. Rapid fire. Jam the circuits in the mind. Then, after a while, you can let up a bit and go back to the breath. So you’re trying to keep track of the breath. And as for any thoughts that would pull you away from the breath, you just put them aside. Another best way to keep yourself from getting interested in those thoughts, though, is to make the breath as interesting as possible. So keep your mind in yourself. This is a good place to stay. You want to learn a new skill. You’re trying to train the mind. Of course, training the mind means that it’s going to have to be obedient. You make up your mind you’re going to stay, and then you have to learn how to make it want to stay. Find some joy in staying. Find some relief, rest, strength. Whatever it’s lacking right now, you can gain from settling down with the breath. So see the value of training your mind. And realize, of course, that training the mind is a lot more difficult than training an animal. There’s a story in the Canon where an elephant trainer comes to see the Buddha. He says, “I could take an untrained elephant and drive it from here to the next town and then back. And in the course of that short period of time, I will learn all the tricks that that elephant has, and I’ll be able to outsmart it.” But the human being says, “Oh, that’s a tangle.” So be prepared for the fact that there will be parts of your mind that are not interested in meditating right now. They don’t want to be trained. Just learn how not to identify with them. Think of the mind as being like a committee, and you’ve got some obstreperous members in the committee. So learn how to outwit them. Try to get the breath on your side as one of your tools to create a sense of well-being inside. Ask yourself which parts of your body feel starved of energy, and we’ll provide them with energy each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Even when you breathe out, think of the body as being full of energy, a healthy energy. So get the breath on your side, and you’ll find that the mind can get a lot, a lot easier to train.

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