Slings & Arrows

August 5, 2023

One of the reasons we come to a place like this, where it’s quiet, you have some time by yourself, is so that we can get away from the rough and tumble of the world outside and give the mind a chance to heal. Because the world is a rough place. When we’re born, we’re guaranteed aging, illness, and death. In addition to dealing with our own defilements, we have to deal with the defilements of other people. So it’s good to have some time to get away from their defilements, focus on ours, and to learn the skills that we need in order to deal with our own defilements. Like when you’re meditating right now, giving the mind a peaceful object to focus on, the breath coming in and going out. Unfortunately it’s not just in and out, in and out. As you get sensitive to how the breath feels in different parts of the body, you find that’s something you can play with. Breathing all the way down to the toes, soothing every part of the body on its way. As you breathe out, think of it radiating out into the air in all directions. This is called bodily fabrication, the in and out breath. And it’s called that because you can change it here in the present moment. It’s one of the three ways that you can change things. You’re not totally subject to what’s coming in from outside or what’s coming in from your past karma. You can shape things in a skillful way. This is one of the most important lessons of the meditation. We’re not here just to accept things as they are. As I said this morning, we’re more here to learn how to accept things as they work. How can you work with cause and effect to give a sense of well-being in addition to bodily fabrication. That’s what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication. Like right now you’re talking to yourself. That’s verbal fabrication. Technically it’s directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to something skillful and then you try to evaluate it in a skillful way. In this case it’s the breath. And you evaluate whether long breathing feels good or short breathing. Deep or shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. When you find a rhythm that feels right, try to maintain that until it doesn’t feel good anymore. Then you can change it again. The important thing is that you sensitize yourself to the possibilities of the breath here. Because it is possible to breathe in ways and to be sensitive to the breath in ways that give rise to a sense of fullness, refreshment, ease and pleasure. That’s a useful potential. Then in addition to bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication, there’s mental fabrication. It’s your perceptions and your feelings. Because these are the things that have an influence on the state of your mind. Perceptions are the words that you use to identify and label things. Or mental images that you use to identify them. To give them meaning. To evaluate them. The feelings, of course, are the feeling tones of pleasure, pain. Either pleasure nor pain. And as you scan the body right now, you’ll notice that there are parts of the body that if you focused on them in certain ways could get very painful. There are other parts of the body that if you focus on them can get very pleasant. So as the Buddha recommends, you focus on the pleasant possibilities. The pleasant potentials. Try to make the most of them. So you have these three things working together. The greatest sense of well-being. The way you breathe. The way you talk to yourself. The perceptions and feelings that you focus on. Like your perception of the breath. How does the breath run through the body? When you breathe in, which muscles are doing the breathing? Could they use a little help? Could they use a little rest? Think of them relaxing. And then other parts of the body will take over. Our perceptions are our fabrications, which means we put them together. So the test is, how true are they? Well, the best test is to see what kind of effect do they have when you use them. Some things may be true, but they’re not beneficial. In which case you let them go. You find other ones that are true and are more beneficial. So you realize that you’re not simply here to accept things as they are. But you accept the fact that there are potentials and that you can learn skills to use those potentials to help yourself. These are the skills that you can take with you. When you leave the monastery, you can’t take the sound of the crickets. It may happen on your phone. But it’s not the same as having the actual sound. You can’t take the atmosphere. You can’t take the quiet. But you can take your skills. And this is the most important part of being here, is developing these skills and realizing you can take them with you. It requires an extra act of determination, because the world outside is not as amenable to the practice. But if the practice couldn’t be done in the world outside, it’d be like a hothouse plant that can live only in very precise conditions and will die if it leaves the hothouse. Like those pandas that can eat only a certain type of bamboo. And as the bamboo begins to disappear, they’re put to difficulties, because they can’t adjust. They have no extra skills. But the fact that you can develop these skills and you can work on them here, in the world outside, is an important step to realizing that you can work on these skills all the way to death, and they’ll help you all the way to death, if you keep at them. So when you’re dealing with difficulties outside, don’t tell yourself, “Well, this makes it impossible for me to practice.” Take it as a challenge. How do you practice in spite of the difficulties? Particularly with dealing with other people’s defilements? How do you make sure they stay their defilements and you don’t internalize them? Because there are cases where you’ll be dealing with people who really don’t mean you well. We hear so much about accepting, accepting, accepting in the Buddhist teachings. But if you actually look in the texts, there are not that many things that the Buddha has you accept. When someone dies, you accept the fact, “Yes, they’ve died.” When there’s physical pain, you take medicine. But sometimes the medicine’s not going to work, so you have to accept those pains. And then there are harsh words. People say things with the intent of hurting your feelings. You accept the fact that they’re doing that, but you don’t cooperate with them. In other words, you don’t let your feelings get hurt. It’s interesting that the Buddha talks quite a lot about patiently enduring pain. There’s very little in the Canon, though, that tells you how to do that. For that, you have to look in the teachings of the Ajahns. Ajahn Lee, Ajahn Mahaprabhu have some really good advice on dealing with pain. But in terms of dealing with harsh words, there’s a lot in the Canon. First is to remind yourself this is the nature of human speech. We’re not in the Deva realms. We’re not in the Brahma realms, where everyone calls everybody with terms of endearment. There are people who speak with you and they mean well, and other people who don’t mean well. There are people who speak with your best interests in mind, and other people who don’t care about your best interests. People who speak true things, false things. So when unskillful speech gets directed at you, you have to learn how to get yourself out of the way. In other words, someone’s firing a gun. You don’t stand in the line of fire. You get out of the way. The first thing is to remember, okay, this is normal in the human realm, and that people who are speaking with the intent to hurt your feelings are creating a lot of bad karma for themselves. They’re basically sick. They’re basically suffering and they want to take out their suffering on you, which means that the things they say about you are not necessarily about you. They point more to the person who’s saying them. So remember that. They can say these things, but just think of them going right past. This connects with another teaching you find in the Canon, which says that when someone says something harsh, you just tell yourself, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. And when the contact ends, the sound ends. And that should be it. And the fact that it’s reverberating around in your mind, that’s what you’re doing. Telling yourself, why does that person have so little respect for me? Why does that person say those horrible things? When you do that, you’re cooperating with the other person in hurting your feelings. You have to let the sound stay at the ear and stop with the ending of the contact. You have to ask yourself, why do you want to feed on other people’s words? There’s a sense of lack inside. This is where you bring in the breath. The breath is always there, coming in and going out. You’ve got to always have a sense of the breath filling the body, giving you a sense of refreshment. And that way you’re not so hungry for other people’s approval. You’ve got your own sense of well-being inside, and it’s being confirmed by the fact that you feel good in your skin. You create that through the way you talk to yourself and the perceptions you have in mind. Then you’re a lot more immune to other people’s slings and arrows. So remember, you have the opportunity to shape the experience. Other people can say what they want. It’s up to you to decide. Are you going to take their words and hurt yourself with them? Are they going to be firing arrows at you? Well, don’t grab the arrows and stab yourself. Step off to the side. Look at them as that person’s karma. In this way, you can be in harsh environments, and assuming there’s nothing else you can do to stop the other person’s treatment, you still don’t have to suffer from it. If there are ways that you can change the other person’s behavior, this is where you bring in goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the other person. Goodwill doesn’t mean, “May you be happy doing whatever you’re doing.” It means, “May you understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” You wish that for yourself, of course, and it’s the kind of goodwill you wish to other people, in particular to people who are behaving in unskillful ways. You remind yourself you’re not endorsing their behavior. Just realize it would be better for everybody if they could find true happiness within. That way you lift your mind. And you realize that the big battle is not so much between you and the people out there. It’s between you and your own defilements. When you try to win out over other people, the Buddha points out that there’s nothing but more karma. You win today, they’ll try to win tomorrow. And a lot of the battles that go on outside, don’t really do anybody any good. But if you realize that you don’t react, as the Buddha said, like a gong that is broken. You beat the gong, but there’s no reverberation. Okay, you’ve won an important battle. That’s where the real victory is. Victory inside, over your defilements, over your unskillful tendencies to harm yourself with other people’s bad intentions. So when you respond in a skillful way, even if it’s just saying nothing, but being there, but not suffering from that situation, you’ve won a victory. Other people may not recognize the victory. They may actually see it as a defeat from their perspective. But that doesn’t matter. We’re not here to gain other people’s respect. We’re here to make sure that even in a very difficult and very imperfect world, we maintain our intention to behave in ways that are skillful, only skillful. Nothing but skillful. And when you can maintain that intention and behave in line with it, then you’ve won. That’s the perception you should hold in mind. So the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions and feelings that you focus on. These are your tools. These are your weapons. These are your arsenal. Learn to use it in such a way that you come out victorious every day.

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