Take This With You

August 25, 2023

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body, and try to be on good terms with the breath. Think of it as your friend. You’re going to stay with your friend now for the next hour. We go looking outside, and are usually disappointed. So look inside instead. This is the whole thrust of the Buddhist teachings. The reason we suffer is because of things we’re doing inside. It’s not because of the world. It’s because of our own actions, our own lack of skill. But we can learn how to become skillful. Where we’ve been ignorant, we can develop skill and knowledge. We don’t have to go looking outside so much for happiness. It makes it a lot easier for us in our engagement with the world. We’re not so hungry because we’re well-fed inside. Just the way we show goodwill for ourselves, and goodwill for others. We can step back from our urges to do, or say, or think unskillful things. Look at the extent to which we’ve been feeding off of that kind of behavior, and how it’s not been good for us. We all want to be happy. But as the Buddha saw it, it’s through a lack of our own skill that we do things that lead to pain, suffering. So we have to look inside. And the breath is a good place to start. It’s very simple, very basic. And of the different qualities of the body, or properties of the body, it’s the one that you can work with to make comfortable most easily. So ask yourself, given your posture right now, what would feel good? What kind of breathing would feel nice right now? And it may not be what your preconceived notions of the breath would be like. But you’re here to learn. Because when you move into the present moment, move into the body like this, you don’t want to push things around too much. Listen to what the body needs, and you’ll find that you can settle in. It’ll provide you with a sense of well-being if you listen to it, if you’re sensitive to it. Our problem is that our sensitivities go outside. We neglect inside. So here’s an hour to stay focused inside. It’ll help you to get some perspective on the rest of your life. Because the meditation is not just a matter of getting the mind calm. It’s also to get some insight into the way you’re leading your life, where you’re looking for happiness, and where you’re most likely to find it. After all, we live in a world where we lose a lot of things. One of the chants we have—we didn’t do it tonight, but it’s a standard one—is that we’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. The fact that we’re born means that we’re going to be experiencing these things. None of them are things we want. But then there’s a fifth contemplation, which is that we’re the owners of our actions, heir to our actions. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, for that we fall heir. That’s where there’s the opportunity for happiness, for true well-being. So this is where we look. Where do our actions come from? They come from our intentions. And our intentions get distributed in three ways—through the body, through our speech, through our mind. And our bodily actions begin with a breath. Our verbal actions begin with the mind talking to itself, what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. And our thoughts start with perceptions and feelings, perceptions of the labels we put on things, identifying this is this and that is that. Feelings are feeling tones. Pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. It’s from these things that we build our actions out into the world. But they’re all here right now. You’ve got the breath right here. You’re talking to yourself about the breath. You have a mental image of the breath, where it flows in the body. And they’re feelings—pleasure or lack of pleasure. So you’ve got the beginning elements right here. So focus on them. When they’re in good order, then it’s a lot easier to deal with the world outside. All the losses that we’re going to meet with in this world, we don’t like to think about them, we don’t like to talk about them. But if we don’t think or talk about them, we don’t get prepared. So we have to prepare ourselves, as the Buddha said one time. There are five kinds of loss. There’s loss of your wealth, loss of your relatives, loss in terms of disease, loss of your virtue, and loss in terms of your views. Of those five, he said the first three are not that important. Loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss through disease. They’re going to happen anyhow. And what you lose in these terms, you gain again. Think about all the many lifetimes you’ve been through and all the many lifetimes you face, as long as you don’t gain Awakening. You lose your relatives, you get them back. You lose your wealth, you get it back. You lose your health, you get it back. And then you lose it again, back and forth like this. But that kind of loss doesn’t have to pull the mind down. What pulls the mind down is loss in terms of your virtue and loss in terms of your views. As the Ajahns used to say, “You’re going to lose a lot of other things, but don’t lose your virtue. This is your most important possession next to your right views.” This kind of loss can have an impact on you for a long time. So you make up your mind that under no circumstances are you going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. It’s one of the Buddhist few categorical teachings, in other words, teachings that are true across the board in all situations. He said some of his teachings are analytical, which means these are truths that are useful in some occasions and not in others. There are only two teachings that he said are categorical, in other words, true and beneficial, in all situations. One is that you should avoid unskillful bodily and verbal and mental behavior, and you should develop skillful bodily, verbal, and mental behavior. And the other is the Four Noble Truths. Even some of the other basic teachings, like the Three Characteristics of Inconstant Stress and Not-Self, or his teachings on acceptance, are true only in certain circumstances. Or else they’re true across the board, but they’re useful only in certain circumstances. So the fact that the Buddha highlighted skillful bodily, verbal, and mental action and the avoidance of unskillful bodily, verbal, and mental action as being categorical is saying quite a lot. These are the teachings you hold to all the time. There are gradations in skill. Sometimes you’re tempted to break a precept because of compassion or you feel that you’ve got other obligations. But the Buddha never recommended that. Because even that can pull you down. Even that can be unsafe. He taught a teaching that he said protected all those who followed it, in other words, all the kinds of things that will lead to unfortunate destinations, that will lead to suffering. And as he said, if it were not possible to maintain skillful actions all the time, he wouldn’t have taught it. And if it wouldn’t lead to happiness, he wouldn’t have taught it. But the fact that he did teach it means it is possible for you to maintain skillful action in all situations. And it will make you happy. You’ll be glad you did. So that’s the message you should take with you wherever you go. That your actions are your most valuable possessions. And, of course, Right View confirms this. That you are responsible for your actions. It’s not some outside force acting through you. You’re acting through your own habits, through your own decisions. But if your habits are unskillful, the Buddha said, you can change them. And part of it is having the imagination to say, “Yes, I can change.” And the other part of it, of course, is doing the work and learning how to argue with the voices in the mind that say, “You can’t do this.” Because your mind is like a committee. Lots of voices, lots of opinions inside. And you have to sort them out. Which one of those voices, or which of those voices, do you want to listen to that will lead to happiness? Which voices are not all that concerned with your long-term happiness? Because that, after all, is the beginning of wisdom. The question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” You always want to keep the long-term in mind. When you do that and can learn how to overcome your likes and dislikes, then you’re safe. Because there are some things that will be for your long-term happiness, and you like to do them. Those are easy. There are things that will be for your long-term harm, and you don’t like doing them. Those are easy, too. You just don’t do them. The ones that are hard are the ones where you like to do something, but it’s going to be for your long-term harm. Or the ones where you don’t like doing something that will lead to your long-term welfare. That’s where your wisdom comes in. Wisdom doesn’t have to do with abstractions. In fact, when we look at the teachings that seem fairly abstract, we realize that they come out of this question, “How do you talk yourself into doing the things you like but will be harmful? And how do you talk yourself into doing the things you don’t like that will lead to happiness?” Even the teaching on emptiness, which is about as abstract as you can get, is not really abstract. The Buddha says you want to look in your mind as the mind begins to settle down and appreciate that it is free of disturbance. But you also want to look to see where you are creating disturbance. What can you do to stop? So it can be more empty of disturbance. That’s the kind of emptiness the Buddha was having you focus on. And it’s a good exercise. Whatever abstract teaching you’ve learned about wisdom or insight, it all comes down to this question, “When I do what will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? When I do what will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? And how do I overcome the likes and dislikes that get in the way of acting on those questions?” Because you don’t just ask the questions or take in information. You have goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others. Because you realize that any action that is going to lead to long-term well-being has to not harm anybody else. Because if it does, they’re going to do it again to put an end to your happiness. So wisdom goes together with compassion. And then you actually carry it out, carry it through. This is where you develop purity. In other words, you make sure that you’re actually doing something that’s going to cause no harm. You are doing it with the intention that if you act on it, it will cause harm. You just don’t follow it. If something seems like it’s going to be harmless, you go ahead and do it. But if you are causing harm, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you continue. And then when you’re done, you look at the long-term. If you see that you did cause harm, you make up your mind not to do it. Not to repeat that action. This, the Buddha said, is how you achieve purity in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds. So there you have it. Wisdom, compassion, purity. They all come out of this basic question, the desire for long-term happiness. The realization that long-term is better than short-term, and long-term is possible. And it’s going to depend on your actions. Everything else that the Buddha taught derives from this. So always keep this in mind. You’ve got too many things to keep in mind. They start erasing one another. But this basic principle that you’re going to hold to your virtue and hold to your right view is something you can carry with you wherever you go. It’s something that will always nourish you wherever you go, protect you wherever you go. The Buddha said that was a teacher’s duty to his or her students, to offer protection. And the kind of protection the Buddha gave was knowledge of what should and shouldn’t be done, and principles for how to decide what should and shouldn’t be done, so that you can protect yourself with this knowledge. So this is the kind of teaching that you should always keep with you. As you go through life, there are a lot of things you have to let go of, a lot of things that would weigh you down if you hold on to them. But this is something that, when you hold on to it, lifts you up.

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