The Path to End Craving

September 17, 2023

As we meditate, we’re following a path. We take it one step at a time. If you spend too much time thinking about the end of the path, you may not be paying much enough attention to what you’re doing right now. So be confident that this is a path that goes to a good place, and focus on each breath as it comes. You might say, “We’re here to train the mind. Why are we focusing on the breath?” Well, to get to know the mind, you have to give it something to focus on. Otherwise, it’s floating around, and it’s hard to catch. But if you give it something it likes, it’s going to stay. A John Fung’s image was of trying to catch eels. If you jump down into the mud to catch the eels, they slither off this way and that. But if you find something they like, and as you said, they like dead dogs, it’s not a pretty image. But you take a dead dog, put it in a big clay jar, stick it down in the mud, and the eels will come on their own. And then you can catch them as you like. So, focus the mind on the breath, and create a sense of ease in the body through the way you breathe. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Find what way of breathing feels good. And then also pay attention to your perception of the breath, in other words, the mental image you hold in mind. Because there are lots of different ways of perceiving the breath. You can think of it as the air coming in and out the nose, or as the energy flow in the body. It’s this second perception that has more potential. Because the air at the nose doesn’t feel much different whether it’s a short breath or a long breath. But the energy in the body does feel different. And you can make a comparison, which feels better right now. So use your perceptions to guide your breathing. And then use the sensation of the breathing to judge your perceptions. You can think of the breath coming in and out of the body at one spot, and then spreading from that spot to different spots in the body. Or you can think of it coming in and out through all the pores of the skin. Because it is energy, it’s not air. And there’s a sense of flow that goes throughout the whole body. Ideally you want all the different feelings of energy flow to be compatible with one another, to be in harmony. So hold that thought in mind. Every part of the body is breathing together. As you do this, you’re doing several things at once. One, you’re providing a good place for the mind to stay. And you’re beginning to see the mind in action. How it has an impact on how you view things around you. Because this, after all, lies at the essence of the Buddhist teaching, that the cause of suffering lies inside. And the way the mind deals with its sensory input, with its intentions, the cause doesn’t lie outside. Sometimes you hear that in modern Buddhism we have to think about systemic causes of suffering, problems with society outside. Well, they had problems with society in the time of the Buddha. And he never said that it was because of social problems that people were suffering. They’re suffering because of their own craving, their own ignorance. So if you want to understand how the mind craves things, first you have to get rid of its ignorance about what it’s doing. So I focus right here, right at the breath. And once the mind is with the breath, then you can look at the mind. You can see its intentions. And you can see how the Buddha says that it creates states of becoming when desire arises in the mind. And you start thinking about where you could gain or obtain that desired object, and what you would have to do in order to get it. And in the course of doing that, you’ve created a little world inside the mind. And in that world, you play a role. That combination of world and role, your role in that world, that’s becoming. And you want to understand, why does the mind like doing this? Sometimes it’s for entertainment, sometimes it’s more serious. Sometimes it’s sitting around, though it has nothing else to do. So it creates these imaginary worlds. And if it has trouble with its own imagination, it tries to use the imagination of others. This is why we look for entertainment outside. But it all comes down to these states of becoming in the mind. Many of them are based on sensuality, our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. And the Buddha identifies that as one type of craving that leads to suffering. The fact that we like to spend our time planning sensual pleasures. So you can think about a meal, what kind of meal you would like to have this evening. And you can spend a lot of time thinking about the various things you could put together, and how you could put them together, and how you would eat them. And that’s a very prominent way of dealing with becomings in the mind. So those are the ones we have to deal with first. So just get the mind to settle down. One, you can see these becomings as a form. And two, you give the mind an alternative pleasure, as you gain the pleasure of inhabiting your body. The Buddha calls that the pleasure of form, which is different from the pleasure of sensuality. The pleasure of form is simply how you feel the body right here, right now. Whether it’s warm or cool, heavy or light. If you can combine those feelings of warmth and coolness, heaviness and lightness, so it feels just right, feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out, you can gain a pleasure that, as the Buddha says, is secluded from sensuality. You haven’t overcome the mind’s tendency to want sensual pleasures, but you’ve given it an alternative, a better place to stay. So when you leave concentration, and start thinking about other thoughts, you come at them with fresh eyes. And you can see that some of the desires around which you would create a state of becoming are really not worth it, because you’ve got something better. Now this too is a state of becoming. You are inhabiting the body. The body here is your world. And you are the meditator inside. But this is a more skillful becoming. And the fact that you’re putting this together consciously allows you to see very clearly the steps in how you put these states of becoming together. And so in this way, simply getting the mind into concentration, you’re beginning to get some insight into two of those forms of craving that the Buddha said cause suffering. Now the third one, craving for non-becoming, that applies to taking on a state of becoming and then wanting to destroy it. On the outside world, this would be wanting to destroy the world in which you live or destroy yourself. On the inside level, you find yourself taking on a state of becoming. You don’t like it. You try to do away with it. But in doing away with it, you take on a new role. And you actually create a new state of becoming in the process of destroying the old one. So it seems that you have an impasse here. You’re trying to get beyond becoming, but the desire to destroy becoming is actually going to lead to more becoming. The Buddha said that was one of the main insights on the night of his awakening. And the solution was to look at the processes by which we put new become-ings together and learn how to develop some dispassion for them. This way, old become-ings are allowed to die away on their own. And you’re not creating new become-ings inside. And again, getting the mind into concentration allows you to see these processes as they happen. Because you’re engaging in these processes in order to keep the mind still and concentrated. There’s one step that the Buddha calls fabrication. And there are three kinds of fabrication. You’re doing them right now. The first one is bodily fabrication. That’s the in and out breath. So you’re focused on that. Trying to make that as comfortable as you can. Then there’s verbal fabrication, which he calls directed thought and evaluation. It’s the way you talk to yourself. You pick a topic and then you comment on it. In this case, you make the breath your topic. And you comment on the breath. Does the breath feel good? Does the breath not feel good? What can we do to make it feel good? Once it feels good, what can we do to maintain that sense of ease and well-being? And then once you’re able to maintain that, how do you think of spreading it through the body? Here again, those perceptions come in. This is called mental fabrication. Your image of how the breath can move through the body. Don’t think of the body as a solid lump of lead. Instead, it’s made up of atoms. And between the atoms, there’s space. So think of the breath flowing through every part of the body. In fact, it’s your very sense of the body. The breath is there before the other parts of the body appear to your awareness. So make the breath primary in your thoughts, in your perceptions. And this is what you see. This is what it means to put together or to fabricate a state of becoming. Through the way you breathe, through the way you talk to yourself, through the perceptions and feelings that you focus on. And then you can catch yourself doing the same processes at other times in the course of the day. Once you get familiar with this, you begin to see that your emotions, your moods are made out of the same raw materials. And they’re all pretty artificial. We tend to think that our moods are our real self. This is what we really feel, really think. But usually it’s simply because we’re used to putting together moods like that and it feels natural. And if we’re creating suffering for ourselves by the way we do it, why continue doing it? You can put together other moods, other states of mind, through these processes. So it’s in this way that doing concentration, getting the mind rightly concentrated and asking the right questions, enables you to replace your ignorance with knowledge. And when the ignorance is gone, there’s no room for the cravings that would cause suffering. There’s still the desire that creates the path. And those are good desires. The Buddha didn’t say that all desires are bad. The desire to be skillful, the desire to abandon unskillful qualities, that’s part of the path, a necessary part of the path. Because unskillful things may die away on their own, but they keep coming back. Skillful things may appear, but they can disappear. You want to learn how to be mindful to develop skillful qualities and keep them going. Give rise to them and prevent them from passing away. That requires desire, the desire to do this well. So when you learn how to distinguish between your desires, which ones are causing suffering, which ones are part of the path, you’re getting a better and better grasp of what’s going on when the mind does create suffering for itself and then how it can stop. So try to develop this state of easeful concentration, solid, secure, your awareness filling the body with a strong sense of being centered right here. And in the course of doing that, you’ll learn an awful lot about how the mind works, how it creates suffering, and how it doesn’t have to. That’s the kind of knowledge that’s really worth gaining.

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