

The Noble Path to Happiness

November 18, 2006

The mind is bound to chatter, so if you're doing meditation, have it chatter about the breath. What should it say? "Just focus on the breath. Be alert to the breath. Know when it's coming in; know when it's going out. Let it be comfortable. Don't try to force the breath or to put yourself into a trance."

What you're trying to do is create a comfortable place for the mind to settle down in the present moment. If you force the breath too much, it's not going to be a comfortable place to settle, and the mind won't stay very long.

So try to be very sensitive to how the breathing feels. You'll notice immediately that the breath is not just a sensation at the tip of the nose or the air coming in and out of the nose. The whole body is involved in the breathing process. The lungs expand because the rib cage expands, because the nerves send the message for them to expand. When you get really sensitive to the breathing, you begin to see that it actually does go over the whole body. The whole nervous system can be involved in the breathing process.

So relax your hands, relax your feet. Think of a wave of relaxation coming up through your toes, up your legs, up the torso, around the head, and then coming up from the fingers, the backs of the hands, the arms, up to the shoulders, up the back of the neck. Then, from that point on, it's like a balancing act, trying to maintain that sense of ease around the breathing.

The mind will start to say, "Well, what's next?" That's when you have to tell it, "This is what's next. The next breath is what's next." You're working on a skill. The Buddha never promised any instant magic bullets. What he did teach is a whole series of skills for learning how to relate well to the present moment. And as you've probably learned with any skill, to really get good at will take time.

So try to bring all the proper attitudes you learned from developing skills. Think about some skill you have, that you've worked on and you've learned to master to at least some extent: cooking or carpentry or sport or music. Remind yourself of the attitude you have to bring to it: on the one hand, having the desire to do it well, and on the other, realizing that if all you do is sit there desiring, you're never going to get anywhere.

Learning how to balance the desire so that it's focused on what you're doing right now, learning how to do it attentively, and when things don't go well, learning not to berate yourself: That's how you develop skill. Just keep reminding yourself, "Next time, we'll do better." This is great with the breath, because there's

always the next breath. As long as you're alive, there will be another breath to come to, to be more attentive to, to be more sensitive to. And unlike, say, an artist in his studio who may have piles of mistakes he has to throw away, you don't have to throw away the past breaths where you weren't all that attentive. They're already gone.

So keep focusing attention right here, right here, right here. Be persistent. Keep coming back, coming back, coming back. If you notice things aren't going well, you can always adjust. You might start out by focusing on the tip of your nose, and after a while decide that you don't like that spot. Well, you can move to any other part of the body where it feels comfortable to stay focused, stay centered. Stay there, and make it feel like you really can settle in and feel at home. You might try focusing through the body in a systematic way to see where in the body it feels most interesting to stay.

So these are four qualities you want to bring to the practice: the desire to do it, persistence, being intent on what you're doing, and then analyzing how cause and effect operate in this process of getting the mind to be centered and learning how to use that understanding of cause and effect to make changes.

This is the beginning both of discernment and of concentration. In the beginning your main focus is on concentration, getting the mind to settle down. But the same process applies to developing discernment. After all, what is discernment? Seeing things in terms of four noble truths.

Sometimes we're told that it's seeing things in terms of the three characteristics, but, one, the Buddha never used the term, "three characteristics." And, two, the four noble truths are actually the context, his definition of right view: the question of where there's stress and suffering, and what's causing it, what you can do to put an end to it. This was always the Buddha's primary concern.

He wasn't concerned about the true nature of things in and of themselves. He was concerned about the problem of suffering: why it's happening, what can be done to put an end to it. That's the real problem in life. If you focus on trying to get to the true nature of things, you find it's pretty elusive, because things have lots of different aspects to them. There are many levels of truth about things. It can be very arbitrary which level you're going to focus on, unless you decide that the real problem is not so much the things in and of themselves, it's the suffering you create out of them.

That means that, instead of focusing on things, you focus on activities: what you're doing, the results of what you're doing. That requires some understanding of cause and effect, because the best way to see cause and effect is to do something

and see what results, and then change what you do and see what results from that. You begin to get a sense of which causes lead to which effects.

When the Buddha talked about the essence of his awakening, the most succinct statement he made was a principle of cause and effect: “When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the sensation of this comes the cessation of that.” Two causal principles that intersect. One talks about cause and effect rising together and ceasing together in the present moment. The other has to do with cause and effect happening over time.

That alerts you immediately to the fact that sometimes you want to see the relation between what you’re doing and the suffering you’re causing immediately in the present moment. You stick your finger into fire, it hurts immediately. Other things are going to take time, which means you have to be mindful for long periods of time, alert for long periods of time, to remember what you did so that you can see, “Oh, I did this, and this is what resulted three or five days later.”

There’s a famous story about Ven. Sariputta, who was the Buddha’s disciple foremost in terms of discernment. When he first met one of the Buddha’s followers, he was inspired by the man, followed him, and then asked him, “What does your teacher teach?” And the man, Ven. Assaji, who was one of the Buddha’s very first students, said, “Well, I’m still new in this teaching. All I can teach you is the gist.” And Sariputta said, “That’s what I want, just the gist.” So Assaji said, “Any phenomena created by a cause, the arising of the cause and its cessation: That’s what the Buddha teaches.” The phenomenon, its cause, and its cessation: That was it. That’s all he said. But that was enough for Sariputta to reach the first stage of awakening. Looking at things in his own experience that were caused, and in particular seeing what things were worth ceasing, i.e., things that were causing suffering.

So everything in the Buddha’s teachings is about cause and effect. The discernment that leads to awakening is insight into what you’re doing that’s causing suffering. You can see this in the very beginning of the meditation, when you breathe in certain ways that feel constricting and uncomfortable, and then you change the way you focus, you change the way you breathe, and there comes a feeling of spaciousness and openness: That’s one level of suffering that you were causing that now you’ve learned how to stop.

As the meditation progresses, you get more and more subtle insights into cause and effect. You get closer and closer to home, in terms of the movements of the mind. You begin to see that there is a certain craving arising for this and that, and there’s suffering immediately associated with the craving. You see there’s clinging.

When the mind holds onto certain things because of the craving, there's suffering. So you learn how to let the craving go.

You pursue this into more and more subtle levels in the mind. What you see as a result is what you did to cause suffering. You see how deeply this goes when you finally to get to the point where the mind isn't doing anything that causes suffering at all, when it's gone beyond anything that arises because of causes.

When you come back from that experience, you're not going to want to talk about the essence of things or things in and of themselves. You're going to talk about what you learned about cause and effect, because that's what you actually saw. You did this, and this is what resulted.

This is why, when the Buddha defines alertness as a quality you need in the meditation, he defines it as being alert to what you're doing. Evaluation as a factor in the meditation is seeing what you're doing and seeing what results, and then learning to adjust what you do so that you can get better results. That's a principle that applies all the way through.

This is why the Buddha never talked about Buddha-nature, saying what human beings are, whether we're essentially good or essentially bad, or what the ultimate nature of things is in and of themselves. Those questions he put aside. What he did notice is that we all desire happiness and yet we do things that cause suffering. That's the problem he's focusing on.

This is why he teaches us cause and effect, so that we can begin to understand our actions and their results. This is why he teaches meditation the way he does. We focus on the activity of the body—in this case, the breathing—and the activities of the mind in thinking about things and evaluating them: the activity of focusing on the breath, and then other more subtle activities like feelings and perceptions. There's an element of intention even those activities, he said. Learn to look and see how all these things are connected. While you're here examining your activities, you're going to find all the things you need to know about why you're suffering and how you can stop it.

So the happiness we all want is something we can attain. The Buddha never said that the pursuit of happiness was a bad thing, or that we were wrong to want to be happy. He said it's a perfectly fine thing, a perfectly noble thing if you do it in a skillful way. And that's what he taught: the noble path to happiness.