

Expanding Your Skill Set

March 27, 2010

There is that tension between the chant just now—“The world offers no shelter, one has to pass on leaving everything behind”—and the chants that say, “May I be happy. May I be free from stress and pain. May you forever be well.” What these chants do is recognize that the desire for happiness is something to be honored, but if you’re looking for happiness outside in the world, you’re looking in the wrong place. Out in the world of the senses, there are pleasures to be had, but a happiness that’s lasting can’t be found there. You’ve got to look within, to see what skills you can develop to foster the properties of the mind, the resources, the potentials of the mind that can lead to true happiness.

So we’re here because we honor that desire for happiness, and we take it seriously—not in a grim way, but simply realizing that if you want to be happy, there are certain skills you’ve got to develop. It’s going to take time, it’s going to take energy, but the time and energy are well spent.

So what are the resources? You’re sitting here with a body that’s breathing, and a mind that’s thinking and aware. For these resources to develop, you have to bring them together. It’s like planting a seed in the soil, giving it water and sunlight. If the seed is in one place, the soil someplace else, and the sunlight someplace else, the seed won’t grow. But when you put these things together, then the seed does grow.

So you bring your awareness and your thinking to the breath. Try to keep the breath in mind: That’s the property of mindfulness, reminding yourself of what’s important to pay attention to, what’s important to remember. For the time being, there’s only one thing you really have to worry about, and that’s staying with the breath coming in, the breath going out, noticing where you feel the process of breathing, so that it’s not just the air coming in and out the nose. It’s the movement of the body that allows the lungs to expand, along with the other movements of energy in the body in synch with that. That’s breath energy.

Wherever you notice it—it might be the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest, the shoulders, wherever you can keep track of the feeling of breathing—allow your attention to settle right there. And keep it focused in a way that feels just right, not putting too much pressure on it, but also not being so light that you easily slip away. The traditional image is of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze the chick, you kill it. If you hold it too loosely, it flies away. So you’ve got to hold it just right to keep it right there.

See if you can notice what rhythm of breathing feels good right now. You might try experimenting with some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and see how that rhythm feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. You can experiment with shorter breathing, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. See the effect that the different kinds of breathing have on the body and the effect they have on the mind. Some ways of breathing are easy to follow and other ways of breathing are easy to lose.

So think of this is a time to experiment, to learn what's just right for the body, just right for the mind. Remind yourself that if you find a rhythm of breathing that feels good, it's going to be good for the body. After all, the breath is the basic energy of life. If that energy is tight, constricted, and limited, then it can't give its full benefits to the body. But if it feels good coming in, feels good going out, feels satisfying, gratifying, it can't help but have a good effect on the body. In this way, the training of the mind is also helpful for the general health of the body.

If the mind slips off, bring it back. That's how you strengthen your mindfulness. You couple it with alertness, noticing what's happening. Those two qualities in turn are developed by a quality called ardency: You really pay full attention to what you're doing. In other words, when the mind slips off, as soon as you catch it slipping off, bring it back. You don't have to tie up any loose ends of your thoughts. Even if there's a fascinating thought, you don't have to remember it. If it's really worthwhile, it'll come back to later. Right now is your time to develop this new skill, which is learning how to stay with the breath as continuously as possible. If the mind wanders off again, bring it back again. Try not to get frustrated. Just be firm but gentle. Each time you come back, ask yourself, what was wrong with the breathing just now? In what way was it not as comfortable as it could be? You can just pose the question in the mind: What would one really good breath feel like right now? And see how the body responds.

All these qualities working together—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—help to establish mindfulness. The act of establishing mindfulness: That's the basic theme of your concentration. Actually, mindfulness and concentration work together.

While you're with the breath, ardency means trying to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Once it feels good in the spot you've chosen as your main point of focus, you can explore how it feels in other parts of the body as well, the idea being that you want to work up eventually to being aware the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, allowing the effect of the breath to be as good as possible on the body as a whole. You can take it section

by section or immediately take the whole thing all at once. See what works best for you.

As you get more and more skilled at this, you've added a very important skill to your skill set. The ability to stay focused on the breath and to help improve the breath energy in the body is something you can do not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but also in other places as well: When you're out walking around, when you're dealing with other people, you find it's a really valuable tool to have. It keeps the mind grounded and gives you a sense of inner stability, inner solidity. Even when situations outside are very uncertain, you've got a good place to stay. And you're coming from a position of strength.

That in itself is important, because most of the unskillful things we do in life come from when we feel threatened and weak in the face of a particular danger. We just grab whatever comes to mind to get rid of that feeling of weakness or that feeling of danger. Often what we grab is very unskillful. But if you have a sense of solidity inside, then when things outside are difficult, you don't feel quite so threatened. You've got at least one area inside where things are still okay. The breath can come in and go out, you still feel all right, feel comfortable. Whatever feelings of tension or tightness or dis-ease may be coming along, you don't have to let them totally affect the body. You can have your beachhead here, where the breath feels good and you're okay. You're not threatened.

From that position, you're a lot more likely to do the skillful thing, say skillful words, think skillful thoughts, and not just be reactive. This expansion of your skills is really important.

When the Buddha is talking about the way you create a sense of self, it all has to do with your particular desires for happiness and your particular ways of constructing a sense of self, one set for each different kind of desire. There's a sense of self that can act as the producer of the happiness you're looking for. In other words, based on whatever powers you sense you have, your ability to control your body, your ability to use the mind, your ability to influence situations around you: That's the producer. Then there's the consumer, your sense of self that's going to experience the happiness you want.

So our sense of self, our senses of ourselves, are strategies. The wider our range of skills, the more successful those strategies are going to be. The Buddha actually has you use your way of constructing a sense of self as an important part of the path. He talks about the self as a kind of conceit, and here "conceit" doesn't mean pride. It just means a sense of "I am." It might be "I am better than other people" or "I am worse than other people" or "I am equal to other people": All that counts as conceit. And we're told that it's useful to develop a skillful sense of conceit, i.e.,

you see that other people can practice, other people can attain results from their practice. They're human beings, you're a human being. They can do it, so why can't you?

That kind of confidence is essential for the self as producer. It's healthy and perfectly legitimate. And you want to work on it.

Then there's what the Buddha calls self as the governing principle, which centers on your self as consumer. In other words, as you embark on this practice, you realize you have to give up certain pleasures as you work on the mind. But you realize that you're doing it for the sake of a higher pleasure, something more solid, something more reliable, something with more substance. If you ever find yourself tempted to give up, do you really love yourself? What kind of happiness do you want to attain? You say, "I want something solid and sure." Okay, then work on that. Don't give up on that idea.

The Buddha has you really honor your desire for genuine happiness. Society outside tends to dismiss the idea, saying, "Well, genuine happiness or true happiness, unconditioned happiness, is nothing you can do for yourself. Either someone else will have to provide it for you, or it's just totally impossible. In this case, why don't you buy our car, or buy our product, take a little pleasure along the way, instead of worrying about something bigger, more important?" You can't let yourself give into that kind of thinking. If you really care about yourself, you want a happiness that's reliable. You don't want a happiness that's going to turn on you and leave you more disappointed than before, which is the way most forms of pleasure in the world deliver.

So this is called the self as the governing principle. It puts your desire for true happiness in charge of your practice.

Then there's the reality check of what the Buddha called having a genuine sense of yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are. When you realize that certain skills need to be developed for true happiness, you look at yourself: Do you have those skills? If you don't have them yet, then you work on them.

It's also useful to look at your position in a particular situation. If you have something to tell someone else, but they don't seem responsive, then realize that you don't have the authority it to convince that person. Then just let it go. This gets coupled with the sense of what the Buddha calls a sense of time, which really means a sense of time and place: What's the right thing to do right here, right now? What's right thing to say right here, right now? The more skills you can bring to answer these questions, then the wider range of your abilities in any particular situation.

So this skill of learning how to train the mind—keeping it focused, keeping it mindful—is an important addition to your set of skills. It can actually form a foundation for learning how to use your various skills in a wise and effective way. It allows you to step back from the ways you might normally react—with the various senses of self you’re used to producing but may not be all that helpful—and say to yourself, “Do I really need to identify with that idea? Do I really need to identify with that way of acting? There might be something better.” This opens up more possibilities. It makes you realize that you do have choices. Your self is not a static, given thing. Your sense of self is something you keep creating. And the wider the range of skills you can develop, the more skillful selves you can develop as well.

But make sure you have a very realistic sense of where you’re not skilled, so that you know what you have to work on. Where you don’t have certain abilities yet, realize, “This is something that needs developing, this is something that needs work. I may not yet be proficient in this particular area.” Still, you can look around, what are the skills *do* you have? Physical skills, mental skills, social skills: You want to expand your range. This is a really good skill to have, the general governing principle which is this ability to stay mindful, to be alert, because then you can judge the results of how your different strategies are working, allows you to see them as strategies, as processes, and then gauge how effective they are.

So the simple ability to stay with the breath—paying attention to the breath, exploring what kind of breathing is comfortable—may seem like a small thing, but it’s not. Or even if it is a small thing, some small things are really important: the pin that hold up your clothes, the mouse that freed the lion. This is the little skill that holds all the other skills together and allows you develop your inner resources so that they actually do yield a happiness that’s not going to disappoint.