In Training

April 8, 2024

The Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation start with two steps where you develop your discernment, and then the remaining steps are trainings. The things you discern to begin with are very simple. When is the breath long? When is it short? And then you can discern more subtle things. How does the long breath feel? Does it feel right for you right now? How about short breathing? Or you can try in long, out short, in short, out long. Fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Try to discern where you feel the breathing in the body. What kind of breathing is comfortable? And from there you train. You train to be sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness or refreshment. Train yourself to be sensitive to how feelings and perceptions are having an impact on your mind. Calm that impact. At the same time you’re calming the breath. And train yourself to be sensitive to the state of your mind. Gladdening, that’s what’s happy to be here. Getting more concentrated, steady, still, focused, centered. So it’s not wandering off. And if other thoughts do come into the range of your awareness, you get so that you’re just not interested in them. Train yourself to release yourself from them. Those are the basic steps. There’s more, but these are the ones that you work on to begin with. And the fact that this is a training means that you play two roles. You’re the student who’s learning how to do this, and then you’re the teacher who sets the goals and then judges your results. In the course of learning how to meditate, you have to train both sides, both the student and the teacher inside. Because the teacher basically comes out of our commentator. And for a lot of us, our inner commentator is pretty unskilled. We set unrealistic goals and then punish ourselves when we can’t reach them. Or we take a vacation and say, “Hey, whatever you want.” Neither of those is a good teacher. As for the student, the student has to learn how to take instructions from the teacher. To be consistent and sticking with them. So you can really know when you’ve made a decision to breathe in a certain way or think in a certain way, what are the results? If you don’t stick with the assignment, you’re never really going to know. Spend a little time here, then wander off. Then you come back a little bit more, and then you wander off again. How are you going to be able to judge whether it was a good assignment or not? You didn’t really do it. And particularly in learning how to observe your mind, how are you going to know when it needs to be gladdened? Because there are times, as the Buddha said, with outside speech, there are times when it’s right to speak in kind, gentle ways, and other times it’s right to speech in disagreeable and harsh, unpleasant ways. And you’ve got to figure out when. So when does the mind need to be gladdened? When does it need to be chastened? You’ve got to work on this teacher inside. Otherwise the mind just goes with its moods. We’re talking this afternoon about how the middle of the afternoon is like this big valley full of marshes and swamps. And if you just wallow in your moods, yeah, you just wallow in the swamps. You need somebody inside to say, “Okay, out. This is not good for you.” And to do it in a way that’s effective. So you may be intent on doing this well. But if you don’t train yourself, you can come with all kinds of ideas, which may be perfectly right, but you don’t really know if they’re true and you don’t know their impact. Because the Dhamma, as what the Buddha calls an “atta,” it’s goal, it’s purpose, it’s profit, it’s good results. It’s an interesting word. It contains so many different meanings. And one of its meanings is “meaning,” the meaning of the Dhamma and the meaning there, the sense of what do the words mean. And also, where do they aim when you really stick with these things? Where do they take you? That also is the “atta.” So it really is a training that we’re doing here. And John Lee of the Different Forest of John seems to be the most explicit in that we’re working on a skill. First we learn from the teachers outside. But then you have to learn how to be your own teacher, set a task, do the task, and then look at the results. If the results are not good, ask yourself, “Well, what could I change?” The way the Buddha divides up the instructions on breath meditation, the problem could be with the body, in other words, the way you’re breathing. Or the problem could be with the feelings that you’re generating. By the way you breathe. Also the feelings in the mind and the impact these things have on your mind. Or the problem could be with the mind itself. Its thoughts are going off in another direction and it’s got some issues from the day. It just won’t let go. Or sometimes it’s not issues from today or any recent day, but things from way back in the past suddenly come up. These issues that have been buried for who knows how long, and all of a sudden they seem really real and really important. And then they can disappear again for a long time. This is a real problem. When you’re alone in the afternoon, when you have a long stretch of time for yourself, you can really get things out of perspective. In the forest tradition they talk about monks going off and living alone and sometimes getting what they call “fung san,” which means basically they get obsessed by a certain line of thinking. And it can pull, pull, pull them down. In fact, your mind is conversing with itself, and it’s in a resonant room like this. It makes it sound like there are lots of different people and they all agree that things are miserable. So you’ve really got to get that sense of the teacher inside and do some teacher training. Remind yourself that the comments you want from the teacher should be true and beneficial and timely, just like with the Buddha’s rules for his own speech. You’ve got to learn how to develop those standards inside yourself. And you have to learn how to read yourself. The Buddha gives six questions you might ask yourself, or six qualities you want to look for in yourself. How is your conviction? Do you really believe the Buddha’s awakened? Or is it just some story from a distant past in a different country? And if you have conviction the Buddha’s awakening, what does that mean to you? What possibilities does it open? What demands does it make on you? After all, we live in a world where there has been someone who gained full awakening, and he taught the way, and the way is still with us. And one of the important things he taught us was that when you look at the present moment, you’re not here just for the sake of the present moment, because what you do in the present moment is really important, because it’ll have an impact both on shaping the present moment and having long-term consequences. In some ways it’s like that old tale about the ant and the grasshopper. The grasshopper is singing, singing, singing away in the summer sun. He sees the ants busy working, caring here, caring there. He says, “Why are you working? The sun is great. The weather is beautiful.” The ant keeps saying, “I’ve got to prepare.” Then, of course, when winter comes, the grasshoppers all die. The ants survive. So what this means, in terms of what you’re doing right now, is you can’t just say, “Well, I feel like doing X,” or, “I feel like doing Y.” You have to ask yourself, “If I do X, if I do Y, what are the consequences going to be down the line?” This is where the trainer comes in and says, “Look, you’ve got to think about the future. You’ve got to be heedful.” If you really believe what the Buddha awakened you, you can’t just follow your mind. You can’t just follow your moods. So that’s conviction. There’s generosity. Are you a generous person? This doesn’t necessarily mean being generous with things, but are you the sort of person who feels inspired to help other people with your time, or with your energy, with your knowledge, with your forgiveness? That should be the easiest of all. It’s often the hardest. Partly because we misunderstand it. In the Buddhist teachings, forgiveness does not mean that you have to love the person who wronged you. Simply that you decide, “I’m not going to pose any danger to that person. I’m not going to try to get back.” Because we’re not here to gain closure with our relationships with other people. The only closure there is in samsara is nibbana. And that’s an individual thing. And so we forgive others. That doesn’t erase their past actions. What it does, though, is it gives you the right attitude, so that you’re not going to create new bad karma yourself. So that’s generosity, virtue. How are your precepts? In particular, the precept against lying. The Buddha held that as having the most importance. Because, as he said, if you have no shame at telling lies, and deliberately lying, then the idea that there are other things that you shouldn’t do just doesn’t occur to you. All kinds of things become open to you. You’ve really got to be on top of your precepts. The more you are, the more you learn about your own intentions. Because we’re not following the rules just for the sake of following the rules. These precepts keep pointing back into the mind. How do you make your decisions as to what to do and what not to do? Because this is the big issue. What we’re doing inside, how our minds work, is causing trouble. But we can study that, and learn about it, and make changes. And you learn about that first by following the precepts. Because you have to be very careful about your intentions. And that leads straight to discernment. How clear are you on watching things arise in the mind, pass away in the mind, and seeing what’s really skillful and what’s not? This builds on your learning, what you’ve learned from the past, especially what you’ve learned about the Dhamma. But the question is, how do you apply that learning to the processes in your mind? Because you know, so much of the Buddhist teachings are about what one scholar called psychological ethics. In other words, how the mind works, and what are the ethical implications of how the mind works, in terms of what’s harmful and what’s not. It would be really good if Western psychology were built on this principle. We’re going to learn the psychology of harmful states and unharmful states. That would be something really worth exploring. Well, Western psychology may not be doing that, but you can do it. And the Buddhist teachings are there to give you some ideas about what to look for, what dangers you might run into, and what ways of deluding yourself you might run into. So it’s good to have some knowledge about what the Buddha taught, and then use your discernment to apply it. And that involves the sixth quality of the Buddha as you look at it, which is your ingenuity. How you take those teachings which were made 2,600 years ago, and how do you make them alive and applicable to what you’re doing right now? Because the Buddha said one of the qualities of the Dhamma is as pertinent as it points you inside to what your mind is doing. And its main terms of analysis are basically the processes of the mind. We’d like to produce lots of things in the mind, but we’re not really that sensitive to the process of production in and of itself. And that should get us fascinated. How is it the mind gets so fascinated with creating things? Because we create stories as we go through the day. You’re picking events here, picking events there, and turning them into a narrative. And those stories can make us miserable, they can make us happy, they can make us complacent. So how do you get some control over that process? Rather than looking at the story itself, look at how you go about creating it. That’s where the Buddha’s teachings become universal, which is what’s so amazing about them. Something 2,600 years ago still applies to our greed, aversion, and delusion, our fears, our jealousies, the processes by which we create these things. Those haven’t changed. The details of what we create may be very different. You look at literature. The literature of that time is very different from our literature now. It’s a product. But the process by which it’s done is pretty much the same. It’s a question of what you focus on, what you don’t focus on, what details you notice, which details you don’t notice, how you stitch things together. It can be something simple like you’re sitting here with pain. How do you stitch the pain of one moment together to another moment to make it seem like the pain of the second moment is carrying both the pain of that moment and the pain of the previous moment, and the previous moment and the previous moment. It keeps on building and building and building. Can’t you cut the chain? Or how you take one pain in one part of the body and you connect it to another pain in another part of the body. And all of a sudden it’s like bands of rubber bands all over the body, tightening, tightening, tightening. Why do you do that? How do you connect things that way? Why? That question should be really fascinating. Something really worth looking into. Because when we talk about practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, it doesn’t mean just following the rules and the precepts of that part. But then when you get into the meditation, you look at the Buddhist instructions and how you train yourself, it gets more and more into how do you use your ingenuity. So these are the areas of the Buddhism that would have you be sensitive to your inner teacher and sensitive to your inner student to get some idea of how they’re doing. And also to give them some ideas of how they could do it better. What areas you would really want to focus on to improve. When you take this attitude, you’re here to train. Think about how the completes train. There are certain things they have to give up. But it’s for the sake of winning. There are certain things they focus on developing and they have to look for where their weak points are and how they can strengthen them and how they can build on their strengths. When you think about this metaphor of training, which the Buddha himself used an awful lot, you see it gives you a much better idea of what we’re about here. You train your inner teacher, you train your inner student. So you can get to know both. And both of course come down to your mind. So when you consciously take on these roles of inner teacher and inner student or inner coach and inner student, you find they help you get through those laws. Long periods of drought in the practice. The long periods of just listening to this reverb, reverb, reverb in your mind can get you out, get you on the track. And the track will take you eventually to a point where you don’t need the inner teacher anymore, you don’t need the inner student, because the skill has been mastered. But in the meantime, make the most of them.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240408_In_Training.mp3>