To See What You’re Doing

April 4, 2025

When the Buddha first introduced this teaching, he introduced it as a path of action. This was basically to announce that the questions he was going to answer had to do with, “What are you doing?” Like right now you could say, in terms of your body, you’re sitting here very still. In terms of your words, you’re not saying anything. But your mind is very active. And what is your mind doing right now? Some of the actions you do can lead to suffering, and others can lead to the end of suffering. That was the basic message of his first talk. That it is possible, through your actions, to put an end to suffering. So you want to pay careful attention to your actions, having a strong sense that you do have the choice of what you’re going to do, or say, or think. And those choices will have consequences. So you want to learn what the pattern is. Basically, if you act under the power of greed, aversion, and delusion, there’s going to be suffering following. If you act on the power of a mind free from greed, free from aversion, free from delusion, then it leads to the end of suffering. The big problem there is your delusion. Because you don’t really know what you’re doing all too often, and you don’t connect the actions you’ve done with the results you’re getting. So you need to learn to be more observant. This is what the meditation is for. Try to get the mind as still as possible, so you can see its movements clearly. Otherwise it’s like trying to find a mouse on the wall when you’ve got the radio player on, and you’ve got the TV on, and the stereo, and the refrigerator is running, and you’re singing to yourself. You’re not going to hear anything clearly. You’ve got to get still. You’ve got to turn off all those appliances. And then the sound of the mouse on the wall will be clear, and you know where it is. You can do something about it. The same way, if you want to see your delusion, you have to get very, very still. So we focus on the breath. In the beginning it may not be all that still. The mind may not be all that still. The breath may not be all that still. But you’re working in that direction. You want to breathe in a way that makes the mind more and more interested in staying here. Because one of our big problems in seeing the connection between our actions and the results is that we run around. We do something, then we run off. We come back, and something happens. We’re not sure, is that the result of my action, or is it the result of something else? Or which action is leading to that result? It’s like watching a show on a TV. You’re in the room for five minutes watching the show. Then you wander off for 15, 20 minutes. You come back. Things have changed. The characters are saying different things. You don’t really know why. Because you weren’t there. As the change has happened. So stay right here. If there’s any desire to go off someplace else, you have to counteract that desire by the desire to stay. And the desire to stay gets fed by making this a comfortable place to stay. You lead up to this by the way you lead your life in general. It’s one of the reasons why we have the precepts, the principles of restraint of the senses. So as you go through the day, you’re not cluttering things up. You’re not doing things that you’re going to later regret. Because when you’re trying to get the mind still, you don’t want to have to run into regret. You want to be able to look at the events of the day and say, “I didn’t harm anybody. I didn’t harm myself.” So there’s no need for a recrimination there. No need for regret. At the same time as you’re trying to observe the precepts, you’re learning some of the skills you’re going to need to meditate well. We’re practicing right concentration. And it begins with right mindfulness. As the chant said just now, keep focused on the body in and of itself. Ardent, alert, mindful. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The body in and of itself means the body simply taken on its own terms. What you’ve got right here, right now. You’re not thinking about the body in terms of the world. Whether it’s good-looking to other people, or whether it’s equal to whatever work you have to do. Whether it’s strong enough to keep on going. You’re just concerned with what does it feel like to experience the body right here. An aspect of that experience, of course, is the breath. There are different qualities or properties of the body right now. The breath is the easiest to control. If you’re going to have an effect on your heart rate or your blood pressure, you do it through the way you breathe. So, focus on how you breathe right now. What kind of breathing feels good? And what does the body need in terms of feeling good? Sometimes when you’re tired, you want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re tense, you want to breathe in a way that’s relaxing. If you’re feeling frazzled and beaten up by the day, try to breathe in a way that soothes your nerves. And if you’re not sure what kind of breathing will do that, well, experiment. Watch for a while. This is how you learn. Set up a question about what kind of breathing might be good, and then try breathing in different ways and see what the results are. There’s a lot in the meditation that depends on your willingness to experiment, because that develops your curiosity. It develops your ability to frame a question properly and then to test it. So, stay with the breath. And the more it feels right for the body, the more you’ll be happy to stay here. Some people find that their breathing is really tight and over-controlled, in which case you just tell yourself, “Well, let the body breathe whatever way it wants to. I’m not going to force it.” And see what happens. The other activity is to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. It means any thoughts about the world right now, that you want things to be a certain way and you’re not happy that they’re a certain way, just put those aside. You can deal with those issues some other time. Right now you want to get in touch with this body that you’re going to take, this breath that you’re going to take as your anchor. Because we need an anchor. Otherwise the winds of the world blow us around. We end up who knows where. And to do this, the Buddha recommends three qualities. Ardency, which is the desire to do this well. Alertness, noticing what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. And mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Sometimes mindfulness is translated as choiceless awareness, non-judgmental awareness. That’s based on a particular technique of meditation that was developed in the early part of the 20th century. The Buddha used the word mindfulness to mean basically the ability to keep something in mind. And here you’re keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. And you want to keep in mind also what lessons you’ve learned as you’ve been meditating. About how to recognize a vagrant thought that could pull you away. How to recognize it before it pulls you away. What techniques you’ve learned in the past as you’ve meditated that helped the mind to settle down. You take a survey of your state of your mind, the state of your body right now. And if you have some experience meditating, you ask yourself, “When I’ve had this state of body and state of mind in the past, what did I do to help the mind settle down?” If you can remember it, apply it. And also remember that you will want to take note of what actually you’re doing right now and the results you’re getting. So if you learn anything really interesting, you can remember that for the next time you meditate. One of the things you should ask yourself at the end of the meditation is, when the mind does settle down, what did you do that led up to it getting at ease, getting a sense of salinity? And then you try to remember those things you’ve done, what the breath was like, where you were focused. And that makes it easier to create those conditions again the next time you meditate. So you can get quicker and quicker at settling down, noticing where in the body is your spot. When the mind does settle down, where are you focused? Because even though we talk about developing a full body awareness here, thinking of the breath running throughout the body, and by breath here we don’t mean the air coming in and out the nose, just the flow of energy. Which is here all the time. Your blood is flowing through your vessels. Impulses are flowing through your nerves. The fact that you know you’re sitting here has to come from your sense of the breath energy in the body flowing. Even though we’re trying to stay with all of that, there will be one part of the body where the mind feels more centered than others. And as you practice meditation, you try to get to notice where are the spots in the body where it does feel good to stay centered, where the mind naturally centers down. There may be one spot, maybe several. Try to notice that. And then once the mind settles with the breath, you try to keep it there. You don’t clamp down on it. You try to keep it there with a sense of well-being. It’s like raising a child. If you lock the child in a room, it’s going to try to get out. But if you give the child something to play with, then you open the windows, open the doors, and the child’s not going to run away. It’s going to get engrossed in its play. Here your play is adjusting the breath, seeing what long breathing feels like, short breathing feels like, fast, slow, heavy, light. What feels good right now? And what feels good, can you stay there? Here again, the ardency comes in. You want to do this well. Because mindfulness could keep anything in mind. Alertness could watch anything in the present moment. But when you’re ardent about doing this well, you keep in mind the things that are relevant to what you’re doing, and you try to stay alert to what you’re doing right now and the results you’re getting. As for other things happening in the present moment, you don’t have to pay that many attention at all. Because you still want to work on that big question that the Buddha asked, “What are you doing, and is it causing suffering?” If it is causing suffering, he gives you some advice on how to change what you’re doing. That’s what the Eightfold Path is all about. So here we’re working on one of the big factors of the path, which is concentration. The Buddha called it the heart of the path. The other factors of the path, he said, are its requisites or its supports. And of the different factors, this is the one that’s most difficult to master. Even with right view, although it may be subtle, you can understand it pretty easily after an hour or two of explanation. But to get the mind to settle down, it can take a long time. But you have to be patient. You have to have a good attitude towards this, that no matter how long it takes, this is a skill worth mastering. And you see that as the mind does get more and more at ease with the breath, that you do feel more solid, more grounded. And you can see your mind more clearly, what you’re doing right now. And get a sense of what the results are. So take this opportunity to see if you can get the mind to be still. Get the mind to feel at home. At home being still. Because there’s a lot you’re going to learn when you do.

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