True to Your Priorities

December, 2002

Try to be on good terms with your breath. Because not only are you going to be spending the next hour with your breath, you’re going to spend the rest of your life with your breath. It’s what’s always there. When you’re happy, the breath is there. When you’re not happy, the breath is there. When you’re awake, when you’re asleep, when too much is happening in your life, when not enough is happening in your life, the breath is always there. And you want to learn how to relate to it in a way that you can hold on to it when you need it, so that when too much is happening you have a place to weather the storm. When not enough is happening, you have a place to go to keep yourself engaged, to keep unskillful attitudes like boredom or frustration from taking over the mind. So to be on good terms with breath, you have to get to know it. Be willing to listen to what the breath has to say. This is what the evaluation is when you try to settle down with the breath, getting a sense of what the body needs right now and what the breath can do for the body, whether it needs long breathing, short breathing, deep breathing, shallow breathing. You give the body what it needs. In the beginning, it may be hard to listen to the body because you’re used to not listening to it. You’re used to forcing it to do this, forcing it to do that. So you have to sit very still with it for a while. Let things settle down. And then notice. If you nudge the breath in this direction a bit, what’s going to happen? When you nudge it in that direction, what’s going to happen? How does the body respond? What’s the feeling tone in the body? And the more you pay attention, the more you can see it with whatever comes up, the more you discover that you can sense precisely what the body needs, where the breath is, where the breath might go the next time you breathe in, to give some energy to a part of the body that’s been missing it, to calm down a part of the body that’s been agitated, to relax a part of the body that’s been tense. If you pay careful attention, the breath and the body will respond. This is what it means to be on good terms with them. All too often when we meditate, we start getting on bad terms with our meditation object because it seems so difficult to stay with it. There are so many other things that would be much more interesting to do, much more interesting to focus on. It seems the more you want to focus on the breath, the harder it gets. This develops the wrong attitude towards the breathing. “Hey, it’s your breath. Who wants to be on bad terms with his or her breathing? It doesn’t make any sense at all.” So just sit down and watch, listen, be patient. Patient here doesn’t mean that you’re going to let things just kind of slide. It means realizing that sometimes you have to be consistent. You have to put a fair amount of effort in, continuous effort, and the results are going to take a long time to show up. It involves trust. It involves a sense of conviction in what you’re doing, reminding yourself that a lot of the good things in life are things that do take time. If you demand only the things that give you instant gratification, you’re not only going to miss out on a lot of good things, but you’re setting yourself up for a lot of deception, a lot of disappointment. So once you’ve decided that this is the way that this is the path you want to follow, you just stick with it. When things get easy, you stick with it. When things are tough, you stick with it. This is what we talked about this morning, the perfection of truth. Truth here doesn’t mean telling the truth. It means being true. It’s a quality of the mind. Once you’ve made up your mind that you’re going to do something, you stick with it. Anything that gets in the way, no matter how attractive or what other good qualities it may seem to have, you realize, “Okay, I can’t leave what I really want for these other things.” You have to have a strong sense of priorities. Sticking with your priorities, don’t be a traitor to yourself. The mind is a traitor to itself. It learns how to lie to itself. It covers things up. You’re meditating along and all of a sudden something else comes up and you tell yourself, basically, to forget what you’re doing so you can go and look at this other thing. Sometimes there’s actually little reason. Well, this is more important. Sometimes there’s no reason at all. You just block out your awareness of the breath so you can move off to these other things. It’s something very easy to do, and that’s something we’ve been learning how to do ever since we learned how to talk. It’s to block out the awareness of the breathing, give ourselves more room to think, and what you’re consciously doing when you’re meditating is not allowing the breath to get blocked out that way. Because this habit of blocking out, it’s the ignorance the Buddha said is what leads to all our suffering. That’s something that we’re very good at, this quality of denial. This is how mindfulness lapses. There’s a slight moment of, as John Lee says, “passing out.” You actively blot out your awareness of the breath so you can move on to something else. And for most of us who like to deal in denial, this is one of the mind’s quickest reactions. You know how to blot this out, blot that out. Sometimes it’s useful for concentration. You blot out the things that get in the way. But for the purposes of what we’re doing here, you may want to make sure you don’t blot out the breath. You don’t want to blot out your sense of why you’re here, your intention and why you’re here. You stick with that. You keep bringing that up to the forefront. This is what directed thought is all about. You keep reminding yourself, reminding yourself, “Stay with the breath. Stay with the breath. Don’t let anything else take precedence.” Then the mind will wiggle, and it’ll squirm, and it’ll come up with all kinds of reasons why it really has to think about these other things and say, “Nope, you have to be firm.” So you have to ask yourself what your priorities are. If you really do want to find true happiness, this is what you’ve got to do. Learn to be in good terms with the breath. Learn not to shove the breath aside. The breath is often like a stepchild. It gets pushed aside. It gets brought out when it’s needed. It gets pushed aside when you don’t want it. No wonder it’s obstreperous. It’s used to being mistreated. So you have to improve your relationship with the breath, and the breath will respond. You’ll find it easier to keep track of the breath, easier to understand how the breath comes in and out the different parts of the body, easier to understand how different types of breathing are good for different types of situations in the body. So what this means, basically, is you have to learn how to behave yourself around the breath. Treat it right. It’ll treat you right. Be on good terms with it. It will then be on good terms with you. Be true to it. It’ll be true to you.

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