Learning from the Breath

November 30, 2003

When you bring your attention into the present moment, where are you? Where are you in your body? Sometimes you find that you’re not in your whole body. You’re in one part someplace. And even when you focus your attention on another part, it’s as if you’re, say, in your head looking at your chest or in your head looking at your foot. Part of this is because our notion about our own minds is shaped by the sense of sight. Your eyes are pointed straight ahead and you have a sense that your mind is looking ahead, too, that you’re right there behind your eyes, looking out. If that’s the case, try to back into your body, behind your eyes, and then just go back back down, the back down, the feet to the feet. Try to inhabit that part of your awareness, and then allow the breath to inhabit that part of the body, too. This is a part of our awareness that tends to get shut off an awful lot. So when you’re meditating, you try to open up the things that are shut off, because that’s where your blind spots are and that’s where ignorance is. And as we all know, lots of suffering comes out of ignorance. A lot of unexamined attitudes, unexamined thoughts, unexamined presuppositions come out of this ignorance. So learn to question your unexamined assumptions. But where exactly are you right now? Try to articulate those pre-verbalized ideas you have. Many times you find them pretty crazy. They’re getting in the way of your being able to settle down in the present moment. Because without questioning, they force you into places where you’re not comfortable. They force you into a partial kind of awareness where it’s difficult to stay. There are a variety of ways of getting into the body. Just go through the body systematically. See how the different parts of your body feel, and try to inhabit each part of the body as you’re focused on it. In other words, if you’re focused on your big toe, try to inhabit your big toe. If you’re focused on your leg, try to inhabit your leg. Ultimately, you’re going to be taking apart that whole notion of the mind being in a particular part. But as long as you have that sense, learn to make use of it, to open things up. Then start asking questions about the breath. How does the breath feel? What is a good breath right now? What kind of breathing feels best for the body? Experiment. In the beginning, you’ll find that some of your experiments don’t work. Sometimes you may decide that a relaxed breath feels really good, but it’s going to put you to sleep if you’re not careful. Heavy breathing may feel energizing, but you find that it may make you tense. So be willing to give some time to being observant. There’s an awful lot to explore with the breath, an awful lot to explore with the body here in the present moment. And it’s rare that we get the time to do this exploration. So you’ve got a whole hour here right now. Try to get acquainted with the breath. Learn to be on good terms with it. Learn to play with the breath. Experiment. Because it’s only through experimentation that you learn. If you forbid yourself to think or forbid yourself to adjust the breath, you don’t learn very much. You think you may be observing the breath in and of itself, but what’s happened is a lot of your subconscious notions, your subconscious adjustments, stay underground. You haven’t challenged them, so they don’t come up out of the lagoon. But when you start asking questions, you begin to see things you didn’t see before. You learn to look at things from different angles. This way, your questioning mind actually becomes an aid to your concentration because it gets you interested in the breath, interested in the body. If you feel trapped here or that you’re simply tying the mind down to the breath, it may stay for a little while, but then it’s going to start to rebel if it feels forced too much. So the best way to keep it with the breath is to get it interested in the breath. Ask questions about the breath. When the breath comes in, how does the sensation of breath start? Where does it start? How do you know when it’s the right time to allow an out-breath to stop and then come in with an in-breath? And then how do you learn how to turn the in-breath back into an out-breath most smoothly, most comfortably? All of these are things to explore. Think of meditation as an exploration. We’re not here to brainwash the mind. We’re not here to program the mind. We’re here to explore. We’re here to learn. And learning comes from asking questions and then experimenting. See what works. See what doesn’t work. And also refine your notion of what it means for something to work and not work. The same holds true with pain. One of the reasons we work with the breath to get it comfortable is that we become a lot more clear about where pains are in the body—exactly which part of the pain is the actual physical pain and which part of it is actually created or augmented or made more oppressive by our reaction to it. Use the breath both as a place where you feel at ease in the body and as your tool with which you’re going to explore the pain. As you get to know the breath, you begin to see that breath energy is something that spreads throughout the whole body. Every time you breathe in, it’s there. Every time you breathe out, it’s there. Some waves of breath energy through the body feel just like that. You start, and this wave begins to go through the body. There’s even more subtle breath energy that goes through the body. As soon as you start the in-breath, the whole body has just breathed in. There are different levels to deal with, and then you try to notice how those different levels interact with pain, or how you use those different levels of breath energy to interact with the pain. Do you see exactly which part of the pain is caused by the way you breathe? It’s caused by subconscious attitudes you may have around the pain, subconscious attitudes that may force you to tense up around the pain, to squeeze it off, or to at least try to hold it in so it doesn’t keep moving around. One of the things that pain does is that it moves around a lot. We tend to think that pain is in one location, but if you look very, very carefully at it, you begin to see how it moves around. Part of us feels threatened by that, and so we try to clamp down on it to keep it from moving too much. Yet the clamping down oftentimes is worse than the pain. So when you begin to get more sensitive to the process of breathing in the body, you begin to see how the breath interacts with the pain, how you can breathe in certain ways that help to loosen up the tension around the pain. When you think about relaxing around the pain, what have you done with the breath at that moment that allows things to relax? Try to watch. You learn some interesting lessons about the breath as you’re dealing with the pain. At the same time, you learn interesting things about how the mind reacts to the pain. All this work with the breath is meant to teach you lessons about the mind. As you open up to the areas of the body that you weren’t sensitive to before, you begin to find that you also open up to a lot of subconscious assumptions and subconscious ideas, decisions that were closed off as well. That’s where the meditation gets really fascinating, as you begin to gain an insight into your own mind, the workings of your mind. There’s a lot to explore here. In the beginning, it may seem like an awful lot. Don’t try to bite off more than you can chew. If it’s simply a question of how you can stay with the breath, then it’s an issue of where to focus, what kind of breathing feels good, and then just keep after that question for a while. Don’t take on too many questions all at once. Be content to build bit by bit. If you get just one spot in the body comfortable as you breathe in and breathe out, even that much can become riveting. As you try to balance the breath and make that spot stay comfortable, no matter whether it’s an in-breath or an out-breath, don’t allow the out-breath to get to the point where it begins to squeeze off that spot. Just allow there to be a sense of fullness right there, and adjust your breathing to maintain that fullness. See how long you can keep it up. That, in and of itself, is a very interesting exercise. You can do it for a whole hour and learn an awful lot. But the learning comes from the doing. Many times we like to think, “Well, just sit here and I’ll just be simply an observer and not do anything at all.” What that does is it drives the doing underground, and it closes off your opportunities for seeing things. But if you realize that your experience of everything is based on decisions, it’s based on choices, it’s based on intentions, that’s the stuff of our lives. So, try to keep raising a few questions that make those intentions more skillful, intentions that keep you in the present moment rather than pulling you away from the present moment. Watch to see what you learn. In this way, every meditation becomes a learning experience. Even when your experiments don’t work out, you’ve learned something. That particular approach didn’t work out at that particular time. You’ve gained some knowledge. So even the process of keeping the mind still can lead to a lot of interesting insights. Be content to start with little things. Make sure that your awareness of the breath is comfortable, your awareness of the breath is as steady as you can make it. If it slips off, come back. If it slips off again, come back again. You don’t have to get discouraged. You’re here to learn, not here to perform for somebody, not here to chalk up a grade. And if you learn that your mind is less steady or less concentrated than you would like it to be, well, that’s a good lesson to learn. If you don’t learn it, you operate under all sorts of false assumptions. Then the next step is to figure out how to make it more concentrated, at least concentrate for longer periods of time. You’re here to learn where you are and then how to build from where you are. In that way, each meditation is a learning experience. Even if it’s a bad meditation, you can’t seem to get things settled down, at least try to have a learning attitude toward it. Remember, even bad meditation is better than no meditation. Because it opens the opportunity to learn.

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