Healing the Mind

January 2, 2004

Okay, get your body into position, hands on your lap, facing straight ahead, your eyes closed. And then get your mind into position. Settle it on the breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it’s going out. If you have trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word to go along with it. You might try bhutto, which means “awake.” But if you find that the mind is not wandering off that much, then you can drop the meditation word. This allows you to be even more sensitive to how the breath feels. This is important. There are so many times when the Buddha talked about his teaching as a medicine for the mind. When you’re dealing with the breath, try to think of it as a healing process—healing both for the body and for the mind. So allow the breath to feel good. Allow each breath to feel healing as it comes in, healing as it goes out. That requires that you get very sensitive to how the different rhythms of the breathing feel. What effect they have on the body, what effect they have on the mind, which ways of breathing are easy to follow, which ones are hard to follow, which ones you enjoy, which ones you don’t. Try to get sensitive to that fact, because that’s what allows the breath to get more and more healing as you get more and more sensitive to its details. So this means you can play with the breath, experiment. As with any medical treatment, the doctor may prescribe a medicine, but then you have to adjust the dosage for yourself. The doctor goes by some general guidelines, but your body doesn’t necessarily go by general guidelines, and neither does the mind. This requires that you be especially sensitive to the present moment, how your mind is relating to the breath in the present, how the breath itself is doing in the present moment, what effect it’s having on the body and the mind. And if you don’t like the effect, you can change. There are no breath police out there to force you to breathe in a certain way or to tell you not to experiment with the breath. If you don’t experiment, how are you going to learn? This fits in with the old traditional pattern of medicine. The doctor was the person who gave you the medicine or told you what medicine to look for. You had to find the medicine yourself and then fix it yourself, take it yourself, and adjust the dosage to what seemed right. In other words, you yourself have to become a doctor, looking after your body, looking after your mind, using the breath as your primary medicine. This way, the meditation becomes not just a mechanical process, but a force in the mind to stay with the breath. But it becomes something that you can actively enjoy. It feels good to breathe in. It feels good to breathe out. It feels good sitting here, just being with the breath and not having to worry about any other responsibilities at all. The texts talk about the sense of pleasure or well-being. It comes from seclusion. And the seclusion here is a mental thing, where you’re secluded from unskillful thoughts. You’re secluded from distractions. They don’t weigh you down. They don’t pull you into pieces. What this does is it allows the mind to get a greater sense of wholeness here with the breath. Your mind isn’t scattered in little bits and pieces, one part worrying about this issue, another part worrying about that issue. All parts of the mind are allowed to come together right here and to be really sensitive to how the breath feels. Because this ability to be with the present, to be totally present to your whole body here in the present moment, is an important foundation for a lot of the practice. The insights we want to gain will have to come out of this kind of awareness. The ability for the mind to settle down and not only get into position but stay into position requires this kind of awareness. So you take this as your foundation. Take this as your basic treatment for the body and the mind. Then you can explore. See how different rhythms of breathing feel for the different parts of the body. Try to go through the body systematically. Once the breath feels comfortable in your primary spot, which may be the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the abdomen, the middle of the head, wherever it is easy for you to stay focused, start moving around, exploring how the breath feels in other parts of the body as well. The breath isn’t just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole energy flow through the body that corresponds to the in-breath and the out-breath. It’s important that you allow the whole body to breathe together in and breathe together out. Have a sense of the whole body being coordinated. Otherwise, the breath may be comfortable in one spot, but if it’s tight and constricted in other parts of the body, the mind isn’t going to want to stay. So you have to think of the kind of breathing that’s comfortable, bathing the whole body with its healing presence, with its healing tone. Go through the body as quickly or as slowly as you like. Try to be really sensitive to any patterns of tension or blockage that may prevent the energy from flowing well. Allow them to dissolve away and then move on to the next, and then the next. Try to do it systematically so you’ve covered the whole body. You might start at the abdomen, go up the front, then down the back, then out the legs. Then start at the back of the neck, down the shoulders, and out the arms. And then start at the abdomen again, as many times as you like, until you’re ready to settle down just at any one of the spots that you find most congenial. And then let your awareness spread from that spot to fill the whole body. And then stay there. This is the standard, but with a very broad sense of the whole body being bathed in the breath. This is how the practice can be healing. It’s not an abstract idea that you feel, “Well, I really should do this because it’s going to be good for me someday.” That’s one of the reasons we do it. But also, in order to maintain the practice, to keep it going, there has to be a visceral sense of feeling really good as you do the practice. And the breath can provide that if you take the time to notice, take the time to pay attention, totally give yourself to the simple process of breathing right now. And when you do, you find that it’s good for the body, good for the mind. This way, the insights that come in the practice become more balanced because you’re well-grounded. And the insights themselves just get you more firmly grounded here as you start seeing into the process of how, through lack of attention, through craving, you create suffering for yourself. Now, through mindfulness and concentration and all the other factors of the path, you can put an end to that suffering, basically seeing cause and effect in your actions. You can see which actions help create suffering and which ones help to relieve it. And you begin to realize that this simple process of being sensitive to the breath and adjusting it, that’s got the Four Noble Truths right there. The Buddha’s basic presentation of his teaching, which is very much like that of a doctor, talks about the symptoms of the disease, the cause of the disease, what it means for the disease to go away, and then how you make it go away. It’s a teaching that’s meant to be healing. And it starts right here, as you learn how to use this simple process in the body—energy coming in, energy going out. Use this simple process to make it a healing process. Understand what’s going on. Get sensitive to how the mind shapes the breath, for good or for ill, depending on how much attention you pay. So we’ve got a whole hour right here, a whole hour to explore this one issue. And as for other thoughts, other responsibilities, other concerns, you can put them aside. You can take care of them later. Right now, the mind needs to be healed. The mind needs to be looked after. That should be your top priority.

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