Alert Stillness, An

January 5, 2004

Pay attention to your breath. When it comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. Notice where you feel the sensation of the breathing. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the nose. It’s the whole process of the body. As the energy comes in, the energy goes out. The energy that brings the air into the lungs and the energy that allows it to go out. That’s what you want to watch for. Otherwise, there’s nothing much to watch. There’ll be other things coming in, but for the time being, you don’t have to pay attention to them. Thoughts come in, just let them go. Sounds around you, let them go. The mind has a tendency to multitask. So we’re going to give it one task here. Stay in with the breath. And if it wants to multitask, use the rest of your energy to fend off anything else that might come in and interfere. In other words, notice. Actually, it’s the things coming in that are not the problem. It’s the mind’s tendency to go latching after them. So watch out for that. Know that the mind has this tendency to just grasp onto every little thing that comes by. And if you see the mind moving in that direction, just drop it. If it moves again, drop it again. So you’ve got two things going on here. You’ve got the mind focused on the breath and then another part of the mind that’s focused on making sure that nothing else gets pulled in. It’s the combination of these two factors that keep the meditation balanced. If you focus on the breath and totally forget about the fact that something else could come in, you’re going to wander off after who knows what. Because you’ll forget. This is what mindfulness is all about. It’s your protector. It keeps reminding you what you’re supposed to be doing here, reminding you of the fact that you could wander off at any time. So you’ve got to be alert. As for alertness, that has to be focused both on the breath and on the mind. You’ve got to stand on the mind to make sure that it’s staying with the breath. It may sound like a lot, but as I said, the mind is always multitasking anyhow. So give it two tasks and that should pretty much fill up the bill. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Allow the breath to find a rhythm that really feels good, really feels refreshing for the body. What kind of breathing would really feel good right now? Explore that question. If you notice any tension or tightness that gets in the way of a really good breath, allow it to relax, no matter where it may be in the body. When you do this, you’ve got two qualities going together. You’ve got the quality of concentration, which settles down and stays still with one object, and you’ve also got the beginnings of discernment. It’s basically in that process of directed thought and evaluation. That’s what is going to develop into discernment, and it’s the discernment that’s going to get you where you want to go. Many times we like to think that the concentration itself is somehow a temporary nirvana and all we have to do is just make it longer and longer and it will turn into the real thing. But that’s not the case at all. It’s that inquiring side of the mind that looks in and checks and makes adjustments and tries to notice things. That’s the part of the mind that’s going to open you up to discernment. It needs the concentration as its foundation. But the evaluation that develops into discernment, that’s what’s going to take you through to something radically, radically other. So whatever the issues are dealing with, whether it’s simply just a sense of stress or discomfort in the breath, or if it’s pain that comes in the course of sitting for long periods of time, that questioning part of the mind that looks into the issue and tries to notice what better ways could there be of acting, and then evaluates those things that you’re trying. That’s the faculty of the mind that’s going to make all the difference. Last year I was teaching meditation at Santa Fe, and there’s this one guy who complained that we’re talking about the issue of skillfulness in our thoughts, words, and deeds. He said, “You’re distracting people from the deathless. All they do is just sit there and open up to the deathless, and there it is.” What you’re opening up to is just a lot of ignorance. It’s comfortable, it’s nice, it feels relaxed, but it’s ignorance. It’s that little questioning part of the mind that notices things, and particularly notices what you’re doing and what the results are and whether they’re really satisfactory or whether they really give true pleasure to the mind or not. It’s that little faculty in the mind that you’re trying to develop, because it’s got to get very sharp and very precise and very subtle. So you start with the breath to sharpen that faculty. And then as the meditation progresses, you get to deal with more subtle issues of the movements of the mind. So when the meditation is not going well, ask yourself whether you’re emphasizing the questioning too much or whether you’re emphasizing the stillness too much, because those are the directions where the mind tends to go off one way or the other. If the questioning lacks the foundation and the stillness, it just turns into ordinary thinking. It can go off way, way, way. If the stillness lacks the questioning, you just zone out. It can be very still, it can be very nice, but it just doesn’t go anywhere. We were talking earlier today about the question of openness in the meditation. You do want to open yourself up inside, because you’ve noticed as you meditate that there are a lot of things that are kind of closed off to yourself inside. You want to learn to open up, to notice what’s going on. At the same time, though, you need protection so that that openness doesn’t open up to everything out there. What’s that little questioning part of the mind, the part that looks after the mind and tends to it, takes care of it? The part that’s heedful. That’s the part that protects you. So when the mind starts slipping away from the breath and going after things, other people’s moods, other people’s ideas, other people’s energy, it’s that little questioning part of the mind that should keep you in check. So watch out. You don’t want to go there. When the two of the faculties come together, both the questioning faculty and the still and silent faculty, that’s when you’ve got a state of mind that you can maintain. It’s the questioning that does the maintaining. The stillness gives it the strength to maintain. So when you need a sort of protective shell around yourself, you can provide it. Think of the energy of the breath just surrounding the whole body so that nothing can come through. You’re aware of things. It’s clear. It’s open. But you’ve got a protective shell. You’re not running out and other energies are not coming in. But as for inside yourself, you want to be totally open to what’s going on in the mind, what’s going on in the body. Otherwise, you’ve got blind spots, which is the way that we normally are. Big blind spots in the present moment. So we’re working on a balance here, the balance of alertness and stillness. The great Thayajans once said, “It’s like being a hunter. The hunter goes out in the forest and on the one that has to be very alert to notice where the animals are, but at the same time has to be very still so he doesn’t scare the animals away.” That combination of stillness and alertness is a very hard quality to develop, but it can be developed. It’s hard for us in the modern world because we’re taught to develop other qualities of mind. And so these qualities get stifled. But as you meditate, you’re taking time to back up and relearn some things that you should have learned a long time ago about how to be still and how to be alert all at once, all-around alert, all-around still. So when the breath gets comfortable, think of exploring the whole body. As you go through the body, section by section, kind of work through any parts of tension you may notice. That are related either the in-breath or the out-breath. And you go through the body several times after a while, you have a sense you can be aware of the whole body all at once. Your awareness fills the body. The breath fills the body. Okay, try to maintain that. Because that’s the state that allows both for the stillness and the alertness to work together. So it comes to the point where it’s hard to draw the line between the two. That’s what we’re working on here. here as we meditate.

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