Breath’s Potential, The

February 25, 2004

Focus your attention on your breath. When the breath goes in, know that it’s going in. When the breath goes out, know that it’s going out. You can focus anywhere on the body, on any sensation that tells you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” If you wander away from that spot, bring it back. If you wander away again, bring it back again. This is called training the mind. It’s like training a dog, training any kind of animal. It has its normal habits of just doing anything, running around. But an animal that hasn’t been trained is difficult to live with. And it’s the same with the mind. The mind hasn’t been trained. It’s here for a minute and then it’s gone someplace else. And if you want it to do any work, it doesn’t want to. It just wants to wander around. So when you try to train it, it’s going to resist in the beginning. But you have to be patient. The reason we’re trying to train the mind is that once the mind is trained, it stops creating so much suffering for itself. This is the big problem. We all want happiness, and yet we cause ourselves a lot of suffering. It’s because we’re not really observant about what we do and the results of what we do. So we’re trying to train the mind to be more observant. And to be observant, you have to stay in one place for a while, to watch things as they come, as they go. So we begin with something really simple, the breath. The breath comes in, knows it’s coming in, goes out, knows it’s going out. Try to notice what kind of breathing feels comfortable. Because if the breathing is comfortable, it’s easier to stay with it. Start out with a couple of good long, deep in and out breaths to see how that feels. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Try shorter in breaths or shorter out breaths, short in and short out. Deeper, more shallow. Heavier, more light. There are lots of ways you can adjust the breathing. So try to get to know how the breathing feels and get a sense of what feels right for the body right now. When you’re tense, you want a relaxing breath, which is usually in short and long out. If you’re feeling tired, you want something that’s more energizing, which would be long in and short out. But those are just general rules of thumb. You may want to experiment on your own to see precisely what the body needs right now. This is an important skill just in and of itself, because the breath is free. Even though they’re trying to privatize our water and privatize everything else, they’re never going to privatize a breath. It’s always going to be yours. It’s always going to be free for you to work with. When it can do so much for the body, it can help. Any kind of stress disease usually can be wiped away by working with the breath. And a lot of other pains and aches in the body, other diseases caused by a poor energy flow, you can work with the breath in such a way that you can alleviate a lot of those diseases. But even more importantly, you can give the mind a good place to stay in the present moment, where it can start watching things for what they are. Think about it for a minute. What’s the past right now? What’s the future right now? The past is only a memory. The future is only a guess. The only things you can really watch as they’re happening is what’s happening in the present moment. When you stay with a breath, you’ve got the mind in the present moment, because you can’t watch a past breath. In fact, it’s hard to remember a past breath. It’s hard to anticipate what a future breath is going to be like. If you’re watching the breath, you’re right here. You’re right now. This forms a foundation. It also develops good qualities. Mindfulness, the ability to keep your mind on one thing. Alertness, the ability to watch, see what’s actually going on. These are important qualities in any endeavor, but particularly in that endeavor to see where the mind is causing itself suffering when it doesn’t need to. You begin to see what you’re doing. You begin to see the results of what you’re doing. This is important, because the most important suffering in life, we tend to think, comes from things outside of us, things other people do or things that just are part of the natural order of things. As we chanted just now, aging, illness, and death, these are necessary parts of life. But if you look carefully, you’ll see that it’s not so much that they cause you suffering. It’s the fact that you latch on to things that are going to age, grow ill, and die. You latch on to your own body. You latch on to the lives and well-being of other people and decide that your happiness is going to have to depend on those things. Then, when those things fall apart, you suffer. But there’s a skill where you can live with these things and not suffer from their change. That’s the skill that comes from meditation. So even though the body ages, grows ill, and eventually dies, the mind doesn’t have to suffer from those things if it can learn to watch itself carefully to see where it’s clinging and how it can let go. But to do that, you need to be observant. You need to see things as they’re happening. You can have it explain to you in the abstract, and you can decide whether you like the abstract idea, whether it makes sense to you or not. But the abstraction doesn’t make any difference. It’s the actual seeing of what you’re doing, the moments when you cling and cause suffering. When you see it happening and see that you don’t have to, that’s when you let go. So we’re taught patience. We’re taught equanimity, about things that we can’t change. But we’re taught not to be patient. We’re quantumists about things we can change. One of the things you can change is the way the mind reacts to things, the way the mind sees things, the things that it does. If it’s doing things that are causing suffering, you don’t want to tolerate that because it becomes habitual. As for the good and bad, happy and unhappy, pleasant and unpleasant things that come in from outside, those are the things that you have to develop patience for. Because if they lie outside your control and you try to change them, you’re just wasting valuable energy. That’s where patience is appropriate. But if you’re sitting here and your mind is wandering all over the place, you can’t be patient with that. You have to try to understand what’s going on. Why is it doing that? What can we do to bring the mind into a spot where it can be more useful and not cause suffering for yourself, not cause stress for yourself unnecessarily? This is why we meditate. The breath is the means for which we develop all these qualities in the mind. If you stick with the breath, your mindfulness gets stronger. If you observe the breath to see whether it’s comfortable or not, your powers of alertness get stronger. When there is that sense of comfort, think of it spreading throughout the body like a dye that they inject into your body. They inject it into one spot and the blood carries it throughout the whole body. If you find a sense of comfort at any one spot in the breathing—if you’re focusing on the breathing in the chest, focusing on the breathing around the nose, focusing on the breathing around the abdomen or the diaphragm—if you’ve got a rhythm of breathing that feels comfortable there, just think of it seeping throughout your whole body, the whole nervous system. Because the way you breathe does affect the flow of energy in the nerves. So allow all the tense spots in the body to relax. Just do a survey down the back, out the legs, and starting again at the back of the neck, going out the shoulders and down the arms, around the abdomen, around the chest. If you see any pattern of tension that’s pulling your spine out of alignment, that’s pulling your body out of alignment, allow it to relax. Think of that part of the body as being involved in the breathing as well, until you’ve got the whole body involved. The whole body relaxes into the in-breath. The whole body relaxes with the out-breath. The breathing finds a rhythm that feels good for the whole body. When the whole body feels good like this and the blood and the energy in the nerves flow properly, the mind feels a lot more inclined to stay here. If you try to keep it with an uncomfortable breath, it’s like imprisoning it. It’s not going to want to stay. It’s going to try to find its escape as soon as it can. But if you keep it with a comfortable breath, even though you may be living in a house—it’s a nice house to live in, everything is very comfortable and you don’t want to wander outside all that much because everything is really nice right here. For most of us, the present moment is a strange place. We don’t spend much time here. We often spend our time wandering around in thoughts of the future and memories of the past. There doesn’t seem to be very much going on right here in the present moment. As a result, we’re strangers to our own present. Yet this is where all the important decisions in life are being made. This is where everything comes in life. This is where things happen. When aging, illness, and death are eventually going to come into the present moment, the question is, what will you do then? If you’re latching on, if you’re identifying yourself to things that are going to be affected by that aging, illness, and death, you’re setting yourself up to suffer. What you want to do is dig down deep inside right here in the present moment and see, maybe there’s something in here that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow. It doesn’t die. And if you can find that, then when change comes to the body, it’s not going to upset you. You see, that’s just part of a natural course of things. But you’ve found something better. You’ve found your safe place. But to see that requires a lot of mindfulness and a lot of alertness, which is why we have to develop these qualities, why we have to work at them. That’s what we’re doing, simply by being with the breath, noticing how the breath feels. If the mind wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. So even though this is a very simple exercise, it has lots of ramifications. It teaches us a lot about our bodies. It teaches us a lot about our minds. At the same time, it trains the mind. So it’s not all over the place, blindly causing suffering for itself and for other people. Because if you watch carefully what’s going on in the present moment, you see your intentions. And your intentions are the big force that shapes your life. And you begin to get a better sense of which intentions are helpful and harmless and which ones actually cause harm. And you realize you have the choice which kind of intentions to follow. And as you exercise that choice in a skillful way, you find your life goes better and better. The mind, instead of causing a lot of inadvertent and unnecessary suffering, actually becomes a helpful mind, a mind you can begin to trust. But to be trustworthy like this, you have to develop your mindfulness, you have to develop your alertness, so that you’re always here as the mind is making choices. That way, those choices are always skillful, always wise. So you’ve got the opportunity for the rest of the hour. No other responsibilities right now. Just be with your breath. Learn to be comfortable with the breath. Learn how to make the breath comfortable for the body. See the effect of the breath. See the effect that the breathing has on different parts of the body. And then you can adjust it. It’s something that’s so close to us. It’s been with us ever since we were born. And for many of us, it’s totally unknown territory, an undeveloped potential. You’ve got this hour here to develop this potential. It’s something absolutely free and very beneficial when you get to know it. So as for your other responsibilities, what you’re going to do after you leave here, put those aside for the time being. Focus on what you’ve got right here, right now. So you’re going to learn how to take advantage of this potential here. Once you really get to know the breath, you’ll discover it has lots of secrets and lots of ways of helping you. It can soothe you in the moment. When the mind and body feel wounded, it can energize you when you feel tired. It can give you a grounding when things around you are changing very fast. You’ve got something solid you can hold on to inside here. There’s an awful lot that the breath can do for you if you get to know it, if you explore it. Most people don’t have this opportunity to just sit and explore their breathing for an hour. But here you’ve got that opportunity. Make the most of it.

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