Catcher in the Rye, The

August 16, 2004

When there’s a talk while you’re meditating, you don’t have to listen to the talk. Just focus on your breath. The talk is here like the catcher in the rye. You know the story. Children playing in the field of rye, and the catcher stands at the edge of the cliff. So if any children run out to the cliff, the catcher is there to catch them before they go. So the talk is here to catch you if you start moving away from the breath. You can stay running around in the field of rye. In other words, stay with your breathing. And if there’s anything that’s relevant to what you’re doing with the breath, it’ll come right in without you having to pay attention to the talk. And if what is being said in the talk is not relevant to what you’re doing, let it go past. It’s irrelevant for somebody else. But don’t let it interfere with what you’re doing, which is getting to know the breath, getting to know the way the mind and the body react to each other, what’s going on. One of the Buddha’s main insights is the process of what he called fabrication, sankara. It’s how much we shape our experience. It’s going on all the time, on many, many levels. So as we’re meditating, we’re trying to get more sensitive to that and to figure out what to do about it. The basic level of fabrication is the breath, which is why it’s the main topic of meditation. Focus on the breath coming in, going out, and try to use your ingenuity in making it a comfortable place to stay, which sometimes may mean a relaxing place to stay. Other times it may mean an energizing place to stay. It depends on what you need. In doing that, you’re doing two other forms of what they call fabrication, what they call verbal fabrication. The mind is talking to itself. One is reminding itself to stay with the breath, and the other is evaluating how things are going. Does the breath feel good? Does it feel right? If not, you can change it. Is your changing helping it? If not, just leave it alone for a while and watch. See what needs to be done or what doesn’t need to be done. That’ll get you in touch with another level of fabrication that’s going on, which is the labeling in the mind and the feelings that come up. Feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain. Feelings surrounding the breath are probably the most basic ones we have, because you can go without water for a while. You can go without food for a while, but you can’t go without breathing. If you feel like you’re suffocating, it gets right to you more than any other feeling. So these are probably the most basic feelings you’ve got, physical feelings. And the labeling that goes along with it, that’s interesting stuff. We first met our breath when we were little kids, and we didn’t have any language. We had our own way of telling ourselves what was going on, describing to ourselves what was going on, without the benefit of any language. And a lot of that sort of sub-verbal communication is still going on. That’s a form of fabrication, too. So it’s all going on right here. The issue is learning how to develop a beachhead, a place where you can stay and be still enough to watch all of this, to participate a little bit and just enough to make a comfortable place to stay. Then once you’ve got that comfortable place, then sticking with it. You can choose any spot in the body. A few of the major ones are the tip of the nose, the palate, base of the throat, middle of the chest, around the abdomen. But actually, you can stay in any part at all of the body where it feels comfortable to stay focused. And do what you can to make that spot comfortable, make it feel right. And just that one exercise may take the whole hour, but it’s time well spent. Once it starts feeling right, though, if you find that you’ve still got some time left in the hour, let your awareness spread from that spot to fill the whole body. Because you don’t want just a one-pointed awareness, because that tends to block things out. Develop an awareness that’s open. Kind of like opening the windows all around the house so the breezes can come in. This helps keep you awake and helps keep you firmly settled when the breath gets more and more subtle. Once you’ve got that firmly settled basis, then you can see more and more precisely the kind of fabrication that’s going on, how you shape your experience in the present moment. This is important. Because a lot of times the intentions are prior to our actual experience of things. So the meditation is going to have to dig down really deep in our shaping of the present moment in order to come up with useful insights and in order to be able to figure out what to do about all this shaping that’s going on, all these intentions that are going on. If your concentration isn’t strong enough, sometimes the insight into all the shaping can be a little bit overwhelming. So it’s important that we get our foundation solid. The more solid your foundation, the less the mind reacts to things. And the less reactive it is, then it can really deal with its insights, really start taking things apart. So you’ve got an hour, and then you have the whole rest of the day, even while you’re working, doing other things, try to stay with your breath. See what’s going on. Because it gives you the foundation, it gives you the perspective you need in order to get out of your mind a little bit. In other words, out of the general pattern of your thinking, the common sets of conversations that go on. So you can look at things from a new perspective, a more solid perspective, a clearer perspective. Getting out of your typical narratives, your typical conversations. As I said, giving the mind a chance to air out a little bit. Don’t look at the meditation as a chore. It’s meant to be freeing. And if it feels like a chore, just stop and think for a few minutes about the things that you’re not having to do right now. All kinds of things that eat away our time. Years back, when I was first staying with the jhanfu, he told me, “Your only duty is to stay with the breath.” And he meant that as a liberating statement that I didn’t have on any other duties that I really had to worry about. Yet my immediate reaction was to weigh myself down with this one big duty. Don’t think of it that way. It’s an opportunity. The activities we have here in the monastery are free. We don’t have to worry about the bottom line. Or the bottom line that’s usually the bottom line out there. Which means that you’re allowed to stay with your breath, get in touch with what’s going on in your mind, this process of fabrication right here in the present moment, as much as you can. And it’s ultimately for the purpose of seeing what is there in the mind that’s not fabricated. Because that’s the only potential for a really true and lasting happiness, a happiness that you can really, really depend on. It’s going to take a lot of digging, a lot of peeling away, layer by layer by layer. But the prospect of that kind of happiness should be encouraging. As the Buddha said, there is an end to suffering, and it can be managed by human beings. So it takes a long time or a short time. That’s not the issue. It’s the fact that you have the time to work on that project. That’s the important thing. Because all the issues in life are right here. When you’re sitting here evaluating the breath, evaluating the feelings and perceptions surrounding the breath, all the fabrications you need to know for the purpose of insight, for the purpose of awakening, they’re right here, all gathered together. And it’s important to learn how to watch them with enough steadiness and enough clarity that you begin to unravel things. So it’s the steadiness and the clarity that you can work on. The actual insights you gain, if you find them useful, work with them. If they’re not useful at the moment, just let them be. Sometimes you get an insight that’s too much for your concentration, it’s too much to handle, just let it go. This is why working on concentration is so important. I knew of a case years back of a monk who went into the forest. He was still just barely getting his powers of concentration under control. And someone told him, “Oh, you shouldn’t be working on concentration. You should be working on insight. Don’t let yourself get stuck in concentration,” he was told. So he did his hardest not to get stuck, and then he couldn’t handle all the thinking that started welling up in the mind. He didn’t have a safe place, a safe harbor to get out of the way. He had worked so hard at not getting into concentration that he couldn’t. John Lee’s example is a person who’s flying around in an airplane and doesn’t have a landing strip. What you need is a good landing strip so that when things get a little bit too much, in terms of insights that you’re not sure how to handle them, you can come back to the breath. Come back to a point of stillness inside, and you can weather the storm. This is why we’re working so repeatedly. This is why it’s called practice. Repeatedly, repeatedly on concentration, on being mindful and alert and centered in the present moment. Because this is the part of the meditation you can do. The insights that arise you can’t predict. But you can will the concentration, you can will to keep the mind centered. And in the course of doing that, different insights will arise. And if you find that putting those insights to use brings the mind to greater stability, greater centeredness, fine. If not, just let them go.

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