Process of Insight, The

September 5, 2004

Focus on your breath. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing. Whether it’s fast breathing or slow breathing, deep or shallow, wherever you want to focus in the body, that’s entirely up to you. Concentration practice is a very personal matter. Different people find that different objects bring the mind in the present moment more easily, more comfortably, with more steadiness. The breath is the most basic of the methods because it has so many varieties. There’s the in-and-out breath. There’s the breath energy that flows throughout the body, throughout the nervous system. There are different types of breath energy in different parts of the body. The breath is also an object you can use both for concentration and for insight. Concentration gives you a good, solid place to settle down. There’s always a breath no matter where you go. There’s always breath energy in the body. So you have an object you can take wherever you go, and it’s very close to the mind. So when the mind needs a place to settle down, the breath is a good place to settle. But the breath is also useful for gaining insight because it is so close to the mind. It acts as a mirror for what’s going on in the mind. As something new and unsettling arises in the mind, many times you notice it in the breath before you actually are aware of the metal of the breath. You notice it in the breath itself. You can analyze the different ways the breath has an effect on the mind, and the different ways the mind has an effect on the breath. In particular, you can engage in meditation. Examine the way your perceptions affect the breath. If you have a certain metal image of how the body breathes, it’s going to affect the way you actually breathe. If you want, you can try to change that image. Some of us have the image of the breath as something you have to pull into the body and then push out. What happens when you think of the breath as something that brings itself into the body and leaves the body on its own? In other words, the body is more passive, the breath is more active. What does that do to your sensation of breathing? Or your ideas about where exactly in your sense of the body the breath comes in, where it goes out? What if it could come in and go out anywhere? Or your perception about the flow of the breath. Where does a flow start? Where does it end? What happens if you change the way you picture that flow? Explore these questions for a while. You’ll find that it gives you lots to explore. Sometimes you can explore them on your own. Sometimes events in the body force you to explore different ways of breathing. You’ve got a headache, you’ve got aches and pains in different parts of the body. You want to explore to exactly what extent the breath is contributing to those aches and pains. If you can change the way you conceive of the breath energy, the way it flows, what it does in reaction to the pain, you learn an awful lot about the relationship between perception and the body. Sometimes when there’s a pain in the body, you find yourself actually holding the pain. That constricts the way the breath can come in and out of the body. Allow yourself to let the breath go right through the pain. See what that does. There are lots of things to explore, and you’ll find that different ways of conceiving or perceiving the breath are useful at different times. Having a sense of time, of the rhythms of the body and the rhythms of the mind, is a very important part of the meditation. It’s one that can be learned only through repeated practice. There are no hard and fast ways. There are no hard and fast rules about when you should be doing concentration practice and when you should be working more on investigating to gain insight. A simple rule of thumb is that if you’re investigating and you don’t come up with anything clear, it’s a sign that your concentration isn’t solid enough for that particular issue. So you drop it for the time being and go back to your concentration. When the concentration starts getting deeper, you become dull. Even though the mind is centered, everything is going perfectly fine as far as the issues of concentration are concerned, but you grow bored. You want to test and see, “Well, is it time to investigate something?” So you might bring up a particular issue, like greed or anger or fear or lust, whatever is an issue with the mind. Concentration and insight have to go together. It’s not the case that you do concentration and then you get your concentration really good and then you switch to insight. As the Buddha said, really deep concentration requires both tranquility and insight. You can’t get the mind to settle down unless you at least have some understanding about how it gets distracted and how not to let it stay distracted, how to catch it when it begins to move away from its object. And how to bring it back. That requires insight. So concentration practice is not just a matter of stilling the mind, but it’s also a process in gaining insight. You’re beginning to exercise your powers of discernment the same way that you’d exercise your body. You don’t wait until your muscles are strong before you exercise them. You’ve got to exercise them to make them strong. The same with your discernment. You’ve got to use your discernment to strengthen it. It’s simply a matter of figuring out what is the rhythm of the mind right now. Where is it in its cycle of trying to gain understanding, trying to gain stillness? Lee gives the analogy of walking. He says you can’t just hop on one foot for very long. You switch back and forth, left, right, left, right, left, right, insight, concentration, insight, concentration, back and forth, back and forth. As the concentration gets more solid, then the insight has a chance to get more subtle. As your insight gets more subtle, you detect things that are disturbing your concentration, root them out, and your concentration settles down even more. Thinking actually forms a part of concentration practice. The first level of the jhana has directed thought and evaluation. But what you’re directing your thoughts to and what you’re evaluating is something that’s right here in the present moment. As long as your thoughts are spinning around what’s going on between the breath and the mind in the present moment, they actually form a part of the concentration, not out of distraction. As you get the breath more comfortable, you find you reach ultimately a point where you can’t make it more comfortable. That’s when you can drop the directed thought and evaluation, just stay with what you’ve got. Bore right into it. So that the mind stays still. The breath can come in and go out, but the mind doesn’t go in and out. With the breath, it stays in one spot, with its range of awareness filling the body, but with a definite center. Then try to maintain the awareness of the breath and the mind in the present moment. In the West, we tend to think too much, which means we need work on our concentration. If anything, err on the side of stillness, solidity, because that’s your foundation. Otherwise, all the insights you’ve read in books will just stay as concepts. They can get very subtle, very sophisticated, but they can’t really deal with issues as they’re arising in the mind right here and now. They’re not doing the work they’re supposed to be doing. All the Buddhist teachings are meant to be used as tools for dealing with issues that arise in the mind. They’re not just as decorations. A lot of people, their insight is like taking all the tools out of their toolbox and mounting them on the wall in their living room to look at. It may be an interesting way of decorating the house, but it’s not what the tools are meant for. When you keep everything focused around the state of concentration in the mind, your questions of insight concern, “How do you keep the mind still in this situation? How do you keep it still in that situation? How do you keep it from getting knocked over from difficult emotional issues?” When you use your insight for those purposes, you’re using it for its intended purpose. The mind is the focal point of what the Buddha was teaching, and it’s the happiness of the mind that’s the purpose of his teaching. So whatever insights we have, if they’re useful for uprooting, peeling off any habits you have that cause suffering for yourself or for other people, they’re useful. Then you’re using those teachings for the right purpose. This is where you see it, right here, when the mind is centered in the present moment. Once you gain an insight, you don’t have to memorize it. A lot of times we like to think that we’ve finally arrived at the true answer about a particular issue. What you’ve really arrived at is the process for getting at answers. Remember that. As for the specific answers, if they’re really good, if they’re really useful, then when the mind is concentrated and an issue comes up, that insight will be right there without you having to inscribe it anyplace. You leave the concentration and try to memorize your insights. Then they just become a little book, and sometimes you forget where the book is placed. But if you remember, you’re working at a skill here. You’re looking at the process of how to gain insight into the mind so you can deal with issues in the present moment. That’s what you want to remember, how you go about things. So the next time an issue comes up, it may not require the same answer, but you remember the process. You apply the process, and it gets more and more refined. And what is the process? Tranquility and insight. Getting the mind settled and then learning how to ask the right questions. From that point on, it just becomes more and more a matter of learning how to read each situation as it comes to see exactly what’s needed. More concentration, more insight. And if you keep these issues in mind, the sensitivity you develop towards these issues and how to work with them, how to deal with them, becomes more and more refined, becomes more and more of a skill that you can depend on in more and more situations. In this way, the Dhamma becomes less and less something that’s imposed from the outside, but it’s something you discover. It’s yours. It’s built into you. And it’s in that way that the Dhamma becomes your refuge.

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