Around in Circles

May 28, 2005

For the next hour, stick out your territory, breath in the body. You don’t want the mind to wander away from this, outside of this territory. It’s not very big. It’s just a couple feet long, a few feet wide, about a foot thick. That’s the size of the body. And what does the breath do? The breath comes in and goes out. That’s what you’ve got to explore. You would think that in a few minutes you could explore the whole thing, but people can spend their whole lives learning new things about the breath. So don’t sit and wonder, “Well, when do I get to move on to the next thing?” Because everything is right here. Everything you’re going to need to know is right here. It’s simply learning to become more familiar with it. How many different kinds of breath are there? There are lots of different kinds. There’s long, there’s short, there’s heavy, there’s light, narrow, broad. There’s the in-and-out breath. There’s the sense of breath energy that flows through the body, some of which moves, some of which is still. But there’s a sense of energy there throughout the body. Sometimes the movement feels blocked. Sometimes it flows. And you’ve got a whole hour to explore it. As a John Lee once said, it may seem like we’re just going over the same old territory over and over again. What’s wrong with that? It’s like going along a path. The more you go back and forth across the path, the smoother the path gets. The weeds die, and you get to know what’s on either side of the path. What plants are growing there? Which plants are poisonous? Which plants are edible? Which plants are medicine? The advantage of a smooth path is that if there are any dangers, you can run fast. This is why I say that by going around in circles here in the body, you’re actually moving forward. Because each time you go around, you get to see something more that you didn’t see before. A lot of times you won’t see anything because you’re not paying careful attention. But that’s the whole point. We’re trying to develop your powers of attention, your powers of awareness. Instead of simply trying to stuff in a lot of information, which is the way we tend to approach education, we’re trying to get familiar with this territory. The first thing is to learn how to make it a comfortable place to stay. And in the course of making it comfortable, you learn a lot of interesting things about not only the breath but also the mind. That’s where meditation has its real payoff, in the sense of helping your sense of the body in the present moment. That’s important, too. But ultimately, you learn a lot more about what it means to be attentive, what role perception plays, what role your thought constructs play, the questions you ask. All of this you learn just by going over the same old territory over and over and over again. After all, the Buddha was meditating on his breath when he came to awakening. What’s the difference between his breath and your breath? There’s not that much. But it was the difference in the quality of awareness that he brought to it. So how do you develop that awareness? Just by sticking with the breath, experimenting with the breath. See what kind of rhythm of breathing feels good, what texture of breathing feels good right now, what the body needs right now. Do you know? Look into it. Try different ways of breathing. See what feels right. And also learn how to experiment. What kind of experiment gets results? If you push the breath too hard or too much, it gets very unnatural. But if you don’t do anything with the breath at all, you don’t really learn much. You don’t get a sense of the real potential of what the breath can do for you. The breath can be an object that you get fully absorbed in and that gives a great sense of rapture and ease. It allows the mind to settle down to the point where not only does the mind settle down and grow still, the breath ultimately settles down and grows still, too. That can happen. But the only way you can learn how to do it is by exploring the breath here in the present moment, going over the same old territory over and over and over again, learning how to make it interesting. Finding out what times you have to be more proactive in the meditation and what are the times you simply watch. These are lessons you have to learn for yourself. Right effort isn’t always a matter of pushing and pushing and pushing. But there are times when you have to push, other times when you have to watch. And you have to figure out, by watching the breath, by watching the state of the mind, what’s appropriate for a particular time. This is what it means to be familiar. Some people throw themselves into the meditation and really push, push, push, and then run into a brick wall and then they give up. And when they give up, they feel a lot more at ease. Then they think that’s the path. It’s just learning how not to do something stupid, but it doesn’t mean you’ve actually learned how to do anything intelligent. The Buddha has an image of a person trying to get milk out of a cow. They twist the cow’s horn, and they twist the cow’s horn, and nothing comes out. It’s when you pull on the udder that the milk comes out. So if you’ve been twisting on the cow’s horn, and you give up, you stop twisting on it, you feel a lot better, but still you don’t get the milk. You’ve got to figure out what is right effort for you right now. That requires that you practice again and again and again, so you get a more and more intuitive sense of what’s right for a particular situation, which is one of the reasons why we have to limit the parameters here. It’s just the mind staying alert to the breath and the present. There are not too many variables, it would seem, but it’s plenty to keep you busy, plenty to give you all the raw material you need to learn about the mind in the present moment, because that’s where the mind does all of its work, is in the present moment. We often lose sight of that. It paints a picture in the present moment, but all of a sudden we get into the picture and we feel like we’re in the past. Or we’re in the future, someplace else. But it’s just the mind painting pictures here, right here, right now. If you don’t want to get deluded by that, you have to watch the picture-painting process. Again, that happens right here. So all things you need to know are happening right here. To know them, you have to stay right here to watch them. So don’t worry about going around and around and around in circles, because it gives you a second and a third and a fourth and a hundredth and a thousandth chance to see what’s actually happening right here. If you miss it the first time around, come back and watch it again. Ultimately, you’ll learn to be more perceptive, pick up on the subtleties. So this is your territory for the rest of the hour. Try to get familiar with it. And in the process of getting familiar with it, you’ll learn a lot of unexpected things. You can learn a lot of unexpected things if you pay attention.

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