Solid Inside

November 15, 2005

My father first went to Thailand to visit me. Part of the trip was to learn meditation. The first question he asked my teacher before they started meditating was, “I’m a Christian. Is this going to be any barrier to the meditation?” My teacher, John Fung, said, “No.” In meditation we focus on the breath. The breath isn’t Buddhist, it isn’t Christian. It’s common property all over the world. Focusing on the breath, we get to know our own minds. We can talk about our own minds. We don’t have to bring in the terms “Buddhist” or “Christian.” The first step in the meditation is simply that—to bring your mind to the breath and keep it there. The qualities you develop—mindfulness, alertness, concentration—are qualities that are useful in whatever your path. The first step in the meditation is to focus on the breath, know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out, and allow yourself to breathe comfortably. Don’t force the breath too much. Whatever the body seems to need, whether it seems to need long breathing or short breathing, or fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, or shallow, let it breathe in whatever way feels good. An important principle in bringing the mind into the present moment is that you want it to be a pleasant place to be. If it’s not a pleasant place, you’re going to go wandering off someplace else. It’s like a child. If the parents are beating the child all the time, then even if they lock the windows and doors, the child’s going to find some way to escape out of the house. But if the parents are kind, give the child good things to play with, give it warmth and understanding, then you can leave the doors and windows wide open and the child’s not going to go wandering away. It’s the same with the mind. If you want to be alert to the present moment, you have to make the present moment as comfortable a place to be as you can. It’s from the present moment that we act. The things we do, the things we say, and the things we think come out of the way we relate to the present moment. If the breath is comfortable, it gives you a sense of good foundation here. What you do and say and think is not coming out of desperation. It’s not coming out of fear. It’s not coming out of hunger. It’s coming out of a sense of ease and solidity here in the present moment. Find the mind wandering off, just bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged, don’t get frustrated, and don’t get angry with yourself. You have to bring it out of desperation. That’s the attitude of goodwill to the practice. Like we chanted just now, “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” One very immediate way of expressing goodwill for yourself is to breathe comfortably. After all, we’re breathing all the time, and there’s no need to breathe in an uncomfortable way. Here’s one very immediate, very accessible, talkative way of expressing goodwill. It’s a totally inexpensive way to bring a sense of comfort and ease to the mind by paying careful attention to how you breathe. In doing this, you’re expressing goodwill not only for yourself but for other people. Because, as I said, when you act and speak, it comes out of your feelings in the present moment. If you can develop a feeling of ease, a feeling of well-being, right now, right here, then your actions are bound to be kinder. You’re not acting out of irritation. You’re acting from a sense of ease and well-being. You’re not acting out of hunger. You’re acting out of a sense of fullness. So what you do and say and think is coming from a better source. That quality of goodwill actually expresses itself in four attitudes, not only goodwill but also compassion. You see other people who are suffering. You want to help. Well, start inside and look at where inside the mind is causing self to suffer. You don’t really have to make yourself suffer. It’s all unnecessary. It’s simply because we’re not observant. We’re not watching the mind carefully enough so we can’t see where it’s picking up a thought that’s unnecessary. So one way of developing this attitude is to look at the breath. Where in the body does the breathing feel uncomfortable? Think of the breath not only as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the process of breathing. Your whole body is involved in that. All the nerves, all the muscles, the flow of the blood throughout the body. The longer you sit here and watch the body in the present moment, the more you pick up these things. One way to make the breath comfortable is to start it with your fingers and start relaxing your fingers and then relaxing your hands, relaxing your wrists and your arms, your elbows, the upper part of the arm, and then start with the toes. Come up the feet, up the legs, up the back. And you notice, as you relax the different muscles, that it’s going to have an effect on the way you breathe. Put an emphasis on the parts of the body that are feeling good. Because if you go jumping to the pain, sometimes you bring an unsatisfactory skillful attitude to curing the pain, and that’s just going to tie things up even more. So notice where the areas in the body are that are comfortable. Focus on them. Allow them to grow more comfortable. That’s the internal equivalent to sympathetic joy. You see something is comfortable in the body, allow it to stay that way. Encourage it to stay that way. And then think of that sense of ease and comfort spreading to other parts of the body. And then there’s the attitude of equanimity. You’ll find that there are some things in the body that you can’t change. No matter how skillfully you look at the present moment, no matter how skillfully you work with the breath, there are certain patterns of tension that may take a while to work through. So you simply let them be. So that you can focus your attention on the areas where you really can make a difference. This is the same principle that applies outside. You see people are suffering, you want to help. You see people are happy already, you don’t begrudge them their happiness. You don’t resent their happiness. But then there are cases where there are people you would like to help, but you can’t. You can’t do that for one reason or another. Or people who are happy, you don’t really seem to deserve it. You shouldn’t get involved in issues like that. That’s their business. Focus your attention on areas where you can make a difference. When the Buddha teaches equanimity, it’s not that people should be narrow-minded. It’s simply a question of priorities. Don’t waste your energy on things that you can’t change. Focus on the areas where you can. When you learn how to bring these attitudes to your own breath, it’s a lot easier to bring them to other people as well, because it’s the same mind that’s carrying those attitudes around. The more solidly you can establish these attitudes toward yourself, the easier it is to establish them toward other people. There’s the parable of the acrobat. The acrobat gets up on the top of the pole and his assistant gets up on his shoulders. He tells the assistant, “Now you watch out for me and I’ll watch out for you.” That way we’ll both stay safe. Perform our tricks, come down, and get a reward. His assistant says, “No, that’s not going to do at all. I have to maintain my sense of balance. You maintain your sense of balance. That way we protect each other. We’ll be safe. We won’t fall down. We’ll perform our tricks, come down from the pole, and get a reward.” In that case, it was the assistant who was right. You’ve got to watch out for your own sense of balance. But in doing so, you’re also protecting other people. You’re not inflicting them with your own imbalance. In other words, you don’t give expression to greed, anger, and delusion. You yourself benefit, the people around you benefit. It all begins from how you relate to yourself inside. It’s something simple, like the breath here. It’s how the mind and the body relate. If you learn to develop a sense of mindfulness and alertness here, a sense of solidity inside, that’s not knocked over by sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations or ideas about this, that, or the other thing. Once you can be solid inside, then it’s a lot easier to be solid when you’re around other people. You can learn how to rely on yourself more, and other people can learn how to rely on you, too. It’s one of those rare areas of the world where everybody benefits. So make good use of this hour to get to know your own self. Notice how the mind relates to the breath. Try to keep both the mind and the breath on good terms. That can provide a foundation for all the other good you want to do in life.

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