Mind Control

June 25, 2006

Okay, time to focus on the breath. If you’re going to think, think about the breath. As for any other thoughts that might come into the mind right now, just let them go, no matter how important or how compelling they may seem. This is not the time and the place for them. One of the most important principles of the practice is having a sense of time and place. You look at the Buddha’s instructions, and they’re fairly complex. After all, there are four things to look for in the present moment. He’s not the sort of teacher who says, “Just be mindful,” or “Just be fully present,” and everything else will take care of itself. You’ve got to look for where the suffering is, where there’s the cause of suffering, what events in the mind actually have the potential to become the path. These are things you’ve got to look for, and they’re tasks for each of the things you look for. If you try to comprehend your suffering, you want to let go of the cause when you recognize it. And as for any elements of the path, you try to develop them. That means there’s a time and place for all these different functions. The main skill in the practice is learning that sense of time and place, what works and what doesn’t work. You learn it through trial and error. This is why it’s a skill. The Buddha didn’t just put you in a pressure cooker and say, “Okay, when the pressure gets enough and you have a neurotic breakthrough, that’s going to take care of everything.” We’re working on a skill here, and it starts from very simple things. Learning how to observe your actions to see what gives a good result and what doesn’t give a good result. Learning to observe your speech. The Buddha’s instructions on right speech are a very useful guide to right meditation as well. Once he was pressed on the issue of whether he would say things that were displeasing to the Sangha. The person who was asking the question was hoping to catch him. If the Buddha said that he wouldn’t say anything displeasing, then they had evidence that he had said displeasing things to Devadatta, the cousin who was trying to take over the Sangha. And if he said that he would say displeasing things, then they would say, “Well, what’s the difference between you and people everywhere?” But the Buddha didn’t fall for the trap. He said, “That’s not a question you answer categorically.” He said, “There are different kinds of speech. There’s true speech and there’s untrue speech. There’s beneficial speech and there’s unbeneficial speech. There’s speech that’s pleasing and speech that’s not pleasing.” Basically, what it came down to was that he would say only things that are true and beneficial. And as for whether they were pleasing or displeasing, he would find the right time and place to say the pleasing things and the right time and place to say the unpleasing things. In other words, there are some instructions that are true across the board. When you speak, you speak only things that are true. You speak things only that are beneficial. That’s an across-the-board kind of rule. As for when things are pleasing or displeasing, you’ve got to see what’s the right time and place. But even then, with that issue of beneficial, some things that are true, they’re not beneficial right now. So you’ve got to have a sense of time and place. And the principle applies to your thinking. Our minds just keep churning out thoughts, churning out thoughts, as if it was a 24-hour factory that just didn’t stop, didn’t stop, didn’t stop. We don’t realize that there’s the alternative, that we can stop thinking about things, or if you’ve got to focus your thinking, focus it on the present moment instead of doing any discursive thinking. Only when you realize you have that alternative and you’ve practiced it, so you can do it when you want it, then you begin to gain a sense that there’s a lot of thinking that goes on in the mind that really is useless. And it just wastes your energy. So you want to make it a rule in your mind that, as you would with your speech, you will think only things that are true, and you’ll think only things that are beneficial when they’re beneficial. Otherwise, you’ll bring all your thoughts back to the breath and try to get as directly with the sensation of the breathing as possible. What this means is you have to learn to turn off your distracting thoughts. The Buddha gives some instructions on how to do this. Again, he recognizes that there are five different ways you can approach the issue. Each approach will work in different cases. The first one is very simple. When you notice that your mind has wandered off, you bring it back. You give it something better to think about. You’re sitting here focusing on the breath, and suddenly you find yourself thinking about tomorrow’s meal. Bring your mind back to the breath. That’s it. Mind yourself, that’s not what we’re here for. We’re not here to think about meals. We’re here to think about the breath. And sometimes just that is enough. In other words, what simply happened was a lapse of mindfulness. You correct that by reminding yourself, “Come back here.” That’ll work in some cases, but not in all. Other cases, where the particular pattern of thinking is really compelling, it pulls you away again and again and again. That’s when you realize you’ve got to take another approach. You focus on the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. If you were to think that way for twenty-four hours, what would it do? It would waste your time, waste your energy, or worse, get you tangled up in greed, anger, pride, fear—lots of different kinds of unskillful thinking, lots of different unskillful states. Do you really want to go there? Sometimes you can remind yourself, “This is a pattern of thinking. I’ve thought I’ve done it many, many times before. I know where it’s going to go, and it’s not going to go to a good place. Why bother? Why go there?” Or, if this were a movie, would you pay to see it? Many times that’s enough to get you disinterested in that kind of thinking, and you come back. There are other times when the mind just seems to be intent on just churning out thoughts—good, bad, indifferent. It’s not interested. It just wants to churn out thinking. So you make up your mind, “Well, it can think if it wants, but I’m not going to go with it.” It’s like a crazy person coming up to you. You know that even if you try to drive the crazy person away, as soon as you get involved in a conversation with the crazy person, the crazy person sets the agenda, and you’re suddenly in that crazy person’s agenda. So what you have to do is ignore the crazy person. The crazy person will chatter away and do everything he can to get you interested, and you’ve just got to make up your mind, “No, I’m not going to go there.” You focus on the breath, and if there’s going to be any chattering, well, let the chattering be in the background. You don’t have to get involved. It’s like those tar traps they talk about in the Pali Canon. They smear tar on a stump, and a monkey comes up, and he sees the tar, and he touches it. As soon as his hand gets stuck on it, then he uses his other hand, or his other paw, to pull the first one off. Well, that doesn’t work, because both paws get stuck. Then he uses his back paws. His back paws get stuck. Then he gets upset, and he bites it. His mouth gets stuck. In other words, there’s some kind of thinking that you just can’t touch. Don’t go there. It’ll churn away in the back of the mind, but just let it be there in the back of the mind. You’ve got your breath here in the foreground, and you find that after a while, as long as you stay with the breath, that other kind of thing will just gradually drop away, drop away, because it was feeding on your attention. If you don’t give it any attention, it just fades away. If that doesn’t work, there are other kinds of thinking that, especially when you’re in touch with the breath, you can begin to notice that when you think a certain thought, there’s going to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It may be in your arms, in your legs, in your back, in your head. As soon as you notice the pattern of tension that goes along with that thought, just breathe through that pattern of tension. Allow it to relax, and the thought goes away. If those four approaches don’t work, you can just grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and say, “I’m not going to go with that thought.” This is the blood instrument in your toolbox for dealing with distracting thoughts. It’s the one of last resort. But sometimes you need it, so make sure you have this blood instrument at hand when you need it. After a while, then, you can let back on the pressure and you find that your interest in going with that thought has gone away. Then you can go back to your meditation. So when you find the mind wandering around, even if it’s useful thinking—the things you have to do today, the things you have to do tomorrow—you don’t have to think about them all the time. Set up your list, write it down, and say, “Okay, I’ve done that. Now it’s time for the mind to rest.” Think of your mind as a machine. It needs to be taken care of. It needs to have its oil checked. It needs to have time to rest so it doesn’t overheat. Don’t let it just keep churning, churning, churning away all the time, because that way it just keeps churning out garbage. It may churn out a few good things every now and then. It’s like all those hundreds of monkeys typing away. Occasionally they’ll type a sentence. But it wouldn’t be much matter to have a person typing for five minutes and then rest for a minute. Try to be more deliberate in your thinking. This is a lot of the principle of the meditation. We have a lot of habits that, because they’re random, can be harmful. Occasionally they’ll come up with something good, but if you learn to be more deliberate about them, then you can find you get more use out of them. It’s like the whole issue of inhabiting your body. We know that ultimately you have to let go of your attachment to the body, but in the meantime, learn how to inhabit it purposefully. Be fully aware of the whole body. This is part of the path. Breathe into the body. Think of the whole body breathing. Every cell in the body, your whole nervous system, is engaged in the flow of energy. Think about that. Then look at what sensations you have in the body that would correspond to that. Look at whatever sensations are blocking that sensation. In other words, there may be tightness here or tension there that’s getting in the way of the sense of the flow in the body. Well, relax the tension. As long as you’re going to identify with something, identify with this, that sense of the whole body. Inhabit the whole body. Then learn how to stay there. What usually happens is we inhabit the body, part of the body, for a while, and then we run off to something else. If you could take a picture of your sense of yourself, it would be like an amoeba, or like a reflection skittering across the water, all very erratic. And because it’s so erratic, you can’t really observe it. You need to give it a good place to stay for a long period of time so you can start observing. What is it to inhabit the body? What is it to identify with? Learn to get some use out of that habit. If you’re with the body, then when thoughts come, you have a better place to stay, where you can just watch the thoughts come and go and not get involved. You see people saying other things, and it goes right past you. It doesn’t have to get sucked in. Most of us have a mind like a vacuum cleaner. It picks up all the dirt and leaves all the good things behind. That’s because it’s out there hungry. It’s out there inhabiting the body. It’s not hungry anymore. It’s not sucking up the dirt. It’s fully inhabiting the body. And you begin to notice the words that people say and the things they do just go past, past, past. You notice them, but you don’t get involved. This puts you in a position of strength. In this way, you take this occasional habit of inhabiting your body, having a sense of identifying with the body, and you put it to good use. Be deliberate about it. It gives you a place to take a stand, where you can watch your thoughts and gain a better sense of what’s the time and place for a particular kind of thinking. In other words, an important lesson of the meditation is to be more deliberate in what you do, be more deliberate in your thinking, be more deliberate in how you inhabit your body. Gain a sense of time and place. So that your thinking becomes right thinking, just like right speech. You think what’s true, you think what’s beneficial when it’s beneficial, and otherwise you drop it. That way, when the time comes when you really do have to think through difficult problems, the mind has the strength. It hasn’t been worn down by all of its random, chaotic thoughts. Otherwise, you inhabit the body, inhabit the breath. Keep your grounding here as much as you can, because this is a resting point. It’s a healing awareness. It’s awareness that suffuses the body and allows the energy in the body to move in ways that feel right. You allow this healing awareness to take some space. You have the space that it requires to do the healing work it needs to do. You make this your home base. Our minds, for the most part, keep traveling around in their thoughts, but without any home base. Here you’ve got a home base and you’ve got the choice. A thought comes along and you can decide, “Do I want to go with it or not? Is it worth going with it or not?” You’ve got the choice because you don’t have to jump into everything that comes by. So once you’ve got this grounding and you’ve learned to make it a healing awareness, you get more and more sensitive to how the energy flows in the body and where the energy is healthy and where it’s not, and how your awareness can affect that. You make it more and more healthy all the time. Then, when a thought comes up, you’ve really got the choice. You’re not hungry for the thinking. You’re not desperate for thinking. You’ve got the luxury of deciding, “Do I need to go with that or not?” And the better you make this place, your grounding here. Then the more picky you can be about what kind of thoughts you’re going to go with. You can choose to go only with thoughts that are really beneficial and really helpful. So your choices are more deliberate, more beneficial. You make them with a clearer mind. Based on what you’re able to see about cause and effect, what kind of thinking goes good places, what kind of thinking goes bad places. The Buddha once said he really got onto the right path when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two classes, thoughts that were harmful and thoughts that were not. So learn to put yourself in a place where you can really see that. Make the distinction. Go with the harmless thoughts. Learn to abandon the harmful thinking. And then also give the mind a place where it doesn’t have to think at all. It just stays with the sensation of the present. That’s what transfers mundane, right-resolved resolve not to do anything harmful into transcendent, right-resolved resolve. To stay in a state of concentration as your home base. So when the Buddha talks about disciplining the mind, he doesn’t drag out the chains and the whips. What he has you do is learn how to get the mind into the state where it can be just still with the breath fully inhabiting the body, strengthened by that awareness. And when you’re strengthened in that way, then you’re not so susceptible to every little breath of a thought that comes along. You’re more in charge. Because you’ve got something better to do than just think all the time. You’ve got a better place to be.

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