Staying True

October 18, 2007

Focus the mind on the breath. Notice where you feel the breath in the body. Any spot where the sensation is very clear that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, focus on that spot. It doesn’t have to be at the nose. It might be in the chest. You can feel the rising of the chest as you breathe in. You can feel it fall as you breathe out. The same with the abdomen. Any place in the body where there’s a sensation that lets you know now the breath is coming in, now it’s going out, you can focus right there. And be careful as you focus to allow that spot to feel open and relaxed. All too often, when we focus, everything gets tensed up, everything gets tightened around the spot where we’re trying to maintain our focus. That makes it unpleasant and makes it easy for the mind to slip away, because it doesn’t like being there. So think of all the blood vessels in that spot being relaxed. The blood flows freely, the breath energy flows freely, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then the spaces in between. The more consistently you can keep that spot relaxed, the more pleasant this will feel. There’ll be a sense of fullness. And then think of that sense of fullness spreading out throughout the whole body, down to the toes, out to the fingers, and then just stay right there. This is not a matter of all that difficult to do, but it’s difficult to stay here. That’s the important part. This is the element of viriya, or persistence in the practice. That also depends on truthfulness, or satja. You make up your mind you’re going to stay here, and you’re not going to listen to any voices that tell you to go away. But there are other, more important things to do. It’s only if you stay here that things can develop. Otherwise, it’s just like a little kid running into the house, grabbing a sandwich and going out. No relationship develops in the family, because there’s no time. It’s like planting a tree in one spot today and then digging it up and moving it around, planting it someplace else tomorrow. You’re lucky if the tree doesn’t die. It certainly has no chance to grow. So once you’ve made up your mind to stay here, you’ve got to talk with a whole committee in the mind, because every member of the committee will want to come. They’ll say, “You’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to worry about that.” Now we’ve got a whole hour. You can dig up some old bones. Would you like to chew on them? The different members of the committee can have lots of different agendas, and some of them are pretty entrenched. Some of these members go way back, and they have lots of old tricks. They can blind you to a moment, for a moment, to what they’re doing, and then you suddenly find yourself off someplace else. A small moment of passing out is a very key moment. It’s a common way that some of the more emotional members of your committee can hijack the mind. This is why mindfulness is important. In other words, you want to keep the breath in mind, and you’ve got to be alert to see how it’s going—not only alert to the breath, but also to the movements of the mind. The mind is used to operating on many different levels. That’s the part that seems to be open to the light of day, and then there are other parts that are down in the cellar. They don’t like to be seen. They’re the ones that tend to hijack things, though. So you’ve got to sit down with the whole mind and keep reminding every committee member who comes up. “I want to see you clearly. I want you to understand that we’re doing this for the sake of happiness, for the sake of true well-being.” All the different members of the committee have that basic motivation in mind. They just have different ideas of what happiness will be, different ideas of what well-being and security will be. The ones that like to worry about the future have a reason for worrying. There have been times in the past when you didn’t prepare for the future, and you suffered. So they might be sneaking around in the back, not very content that you’re sitting here just focusing on the present when you should worry about the future, as they would say. We have to remind them that whatever comes up in the future, your best preparation for the future is to be mindful and alert. So you can remember the right thing to do and be alert to the situation, whatever the situation may be. You don’t want to have your mind hijacked by greed, anger, and delusion at that time. So you want to work on training the mind, developing good qualities that you’re going to need. What this means is that in order to maintain the truthfulness of your original decision to stay here, you also need some discernment. You have to understand the different voices, where they’re coming from. Remember that they’re all coming from one basic impulse, the desire for happiness. So that’s where you can connect with them, whatever they say. They say, “It’s time to go back and look at some old movies about your family, about your work.” You can remember, well, there may be a little bit of pleasure there. It’s like the dog chewing on a bone. It’s chewed on that same bone for weeks at a time. There’s nothing really new there. The pleasure there is simply the pleasure of what’s familiar, or there may be the pleasure of thinking about some time when you’ve been wronged. Part of the mind gets a certain amount of satisfaction out of thinking about how you’ve been unjustly victimized. That’s a very strong sense of self in there. Then you have to remind that voice in the committee that there’s not much real satisfaction that comes out of it. There’s a much more wholesome satisfaction that comes from learning how to be comfortable with a breath. So whatever voice comes up, try to use your discernment to reason with it. At the same time, you’ve got the methods of meditation to show that it’s possible to have a sense of well-being right now. Simply breathe in in a comfortable way, and it can clear the air. That’s called calming. You calm the mind. You soothe it by giving it something good to stay with, good visceral pleasure. So when you’ve got the discernment and you’ve got the calming here, it helps the mind to give up all the things that are going to get in the way of its original intention, which is to stay with the breath, to develop these qualities of mindfulness and alertness, this set of qualities, discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calming. These are called the four determinations. You set them up in your mind as ways of sticking with your most important intentions. When you use some of the meditation, you find that you can’t stick with it longer and longer. It has a chance to develop, and you can stick with it in other situations as well. You can stay focused on the breath as you do walking meditation. You can stay focused on the breath as you do your work throughout the day, wherever you are, at the monastery, at home, on the highway. It is possible to stay in touch with that sense of the breath being comfortable and full as you breathe in. It is possible to stay in touch with that sense of the breath being comfortable and full as you breathe out, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, trying to maintain that center with a sense of fullness and well-being. So you can use that sense of well-being when these other obstreperous voices come up, the ones that want to make you abandon your intention. So here we’ve got some really nice sense of pleasure here. A pleasure with no drawbacks, nothing blameworthy about it at all. Simply breathing. We’ve got the sense of well-being that can infect the mind. Then it’s a lot easier to reason with the different voices as they come up. This is how you maintain that sense of truthfulness. You’re true to your intentions. You’re true well-being, your true best interest, a well-being that doesn’t harm anyone else at all and is actually conducive to their well-being. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha taught this path. He didn’t teach a selfish path to some people and a compassionate path to others. Instead, you look after your own well-being in a true way. You’re actually helping other people. There’s no conflict between the two. There’s no reason why you should abandon your center here. Whatever issues come up that would pull you away, that’s your opportunity to develop your discernment even further. So stay true to your meditation. Stay true to your intention. That’s how you arrive at true well-being. Truth is not a quality of statement so much as it is a quality of the mind, in particular the truth of the Dhamma. We talk about the Dhamma as being words, things that the Buddha taught. But the real truth of the Dhamma comes in your being true.

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