A Home for the Mind

November 2, 2007

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Ventilate your body. And if deep breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Just pose the question in your mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” You might go around the different parts of your body. Ask your arm, “What kind of breathing would feel good for you?” Your chest, your abdomen, your head, your legs, your feet. Ask the different parts of the body, “What kind of breath and energy would you like right now?” Give it to them. What you’re doing is creating a home for the mind here in the present moment. Most of us are homeless. The mind wanders around, trying to find rest here, rest there. But like a homeless person, the places where we try to find rest are not really restful. They’re not really comfortable. Either they’re cold or they’re hot, or the police come along and chase us away. We’ve got to find a spot that’s really ours. Not only a place where we can stay, but also a place where we can keep other people out, i.e., all the thoughts that tend to come in. Most of us have minds that are like bus stations. The doors are wide open twenty-four hours a day. Anything can come in. Some people, when they come in, don’t leave. They hang around and do strange things in the dark corners. So you’ve got to chase them out and turn this bus station back into a home. For the time being, you don’t want to have anything to do with anybody else. Just stay with your breath. As if there were no one else in the world right now. You have no responsibilities. Don’t worry about tomorrow. Don’t think about today. Just be right here. Try to make your sense of the body in the present as comfortable as you can by the way you breathe and by the way you conceive of the breath energy. The breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy throughout the nerves, all along your blood vessels, out to the pores. You’ll find there are lots of different kinds of energy in the body. Sometimes of energy are still. Sometimes of energy flow up, flow down. Sometimes you’ll notice when you breathe in, certain parts of the body seem to have an energy that grows up. Other parts have an energy that seems to go down. When you notice this, then you can ask yourself, “Does it feel really good? How about if I switch directions?” Play around with this energy once you get sensitive to it and see what feels good and what doesn’t feel good. You’re learning some important lessons here. One, you’re learning about the power of your perceptions, the labels you put on things. For instance, you may have a sensation of arm. You can perceive it as totally solid, or you can remind yourself, “Well, the blood is flowing around in there, so it’s not totally solid. It’s liquid, too.” Then there’s the warmth of the arm, and then there’s this energy flowing in the arm. You can choose to focus on any of those aspects. The liquid and the breath energy are the good ones to focus on because they can change. The breath in particular has no obstacles. We may tighten up the arm, and that’s usually the liquid part. In other words, the blood gets locked up in some spots and doesn’t flow as easily throughout others. But the breath energy always flows. Again, there’s flowing energy and there’s still energy. So you can hold that concept in mind and then see how you can use that concept to make your arm more comfortable than your other arm, your torso, your legs. Inhabit your whole body. Because if you don’t inhabit it, other things will. In other words, when you get really sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to realize that when a thought arises in the mind, there’s going to be a tension in a certain part of the body. And if you’re fully aware of the whole body, there’s no place for those thoughts to arise, or at least to catch hold. They may come, but they’ll just go right away because they don’t have any holding spot. This is an important skill, because the more you can fully inhabit your body, the more you’re protected from vagrant thoughts, unskillful thoughts, and the energy of other people. Some of us are like sponges. We pick up the energy from other people. We pick up energy from the people around us. This can be good or it can be bad, depending on the people. But it’s best if you can create your own force field inside and make it as good as possible. That way you have your home inside wherever you go, no matter what the situation. When you’re alone, when you’re a lot of people. You still have that same energy filling the body. This allows you to settle down and have a sense of home, a sense of being able to rest. When you’ve had enough rest, then you can work. Just being in the present moment doesn’t finish the job. It just puts you in the right place where you can really watch what’s going on in the mind. Your life is shaped by your intentions, and if you want to see your intentions in action, this is where you’ve got to watch. When you’re in the present moment, it’s not the case that you totally forget the past. You want to remember lessons you’ve learned as to what works and what doesn’t work, and then you try out those lessons in the present. Sometimes they’ll work again, sometimes they won’t. But the Buddha’s not trying to lobotomize us. He wants us to remember the lessons we’ve learned and find the right balance between being sensitive to the particular configuration of the present moment and also keeping in mind some of the larger principles that work in dealing, say, with greed or anger. Dealing with delusion as they arise. Dealing with pain. Dealing with pleasure. Because sometimes pleasure can be dangerous, too. This is why mindfulness is essential to the practice. Mindfulness actually means keeping something in mind. It’s paired with alertness, which is what watches what’s going on in the present moment. You need the two of them together. Without mindfulness, it’s hard to connect cause and effect, because sometimes the causes and effects are close in time, but sometimes they’re further apart. And if you’re mindful, you can keep track of what’s going on in the mind—the way you approached the breath, the way you stayed with the breath, the way you handled distractions. And then the results you get is where you learn what works and what doesn’t work. And your meditation becomes a skill, not just a crapshoot. The more you pay attention to what’s going on, the more you pay attention to the principle of cause and effect. That’s when you begin to discern suffering and its cause. You might think, “Well, of course we discern suffering. I can tell when I’m suffering.” Well, it’s one thing to be aware of suffering and the other to really discern it. To discern it means you understand it—what it is, where it’s coming from, what you can do to put an end to it. And to discern it, you have to be able to watch it carefully. You don’t have a usual agenda, which is to make it go away right away, or to run away from it right away. You want to be able to sit with it. This is why it’s good to have this sense of being at home. If you’re dealing with suffering when you’re wandering around on the street, that’s difficult. But if you’re dealing with suffering at home, you’ve got the amenities of home to help you. So watch your mind to see what’s going on. And if you find strange people invading, chase them out. Try to occupy your full body. Have your awareness fill the body. Have the breath fill the body. Find the point where it feels like the breath and your awareness become one. Then keep watch over that state. Protect it. When you notice anything coming to disturb it, take it away or let it go away. Don’t grab onto it. Do your best to maintain it. This is where your home is. Eventually, as the Buddha said, you’re going to go to a point where you don’t need a home anymore. The mind is totally beyond all locations. As long as we’re still in the point where we need protection, where we need shelter, create this sense of shelter right here. The place to rest when you need to rest. The place you can do your work when you need to work. Make it your place. Provide yourself with this shelter. Because it’s in the process of providing this shelter that you learn an awful lot about the mind. Protecting this state of mind. It’s not the case that when the mind becomes still, you’re just stuck in concentration and can’t gain any discernment. It’s in the process of bringing the mind to concentration that you learn something about the mind. In the process of protecting that state of stillness, you’re going to learn a lot about the mind as well. You’ll begin to notice what things disturb it, which things you have to contemplate in a lot of detail in order to do away with them, and which things you can simply ignore or breathe through and then go away. In the course of doing this, you’ll learn a lot about the mind. This is why the Buddha said that a good state of concentration requires both tranquility and insight. It’s not the case that all the insight comes after the concentration. This ability to see clearly is a prerequisite for good concentration as well. The concentration and the discernment help each other along. The more solid your concentration, the more refined your discernment. The quicker and more refined your discernment, the more it’ll be able to protect your concentration and allow it to go deeper. So try to find the right balance between the two, of being both still and alert, because it’s when these two qualities work together that they get their best results. Ease, clarity, a sense of fullness, a sense that the mind is healthy and not burdened down by the events of the world. This is how the mind becomes strong.

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