A Quiet Corner

April 1, 2008

Jon Swett used to call the monastery here a quiet corner, a place where you can get away from all the noise of the world. Of course, “noise” here doesn’t mean just physical noise. There’s a lot of mental noise. It’s good to get out here, let your head clear for a while, and take advantage of the fact that you’ve got some physical seclusion. Even though the seclusion isn’t total 24/7, there are still long periods every day where you’re by yourself. Of course, the problem is you tend to not be by yourself. You bring a lot of the noise of the world in here with you. So it’s good to be able to drop that as well. This is called mental seclusion, when the mind is still, settles down with just what’s right here in the present moment. The Buddha defined right mindfulness. You focus on the body in and of itself, just the sensation of having a body here. Already your mind is screaming, but you’ve got all these other things you’ve got to think about, all these other things you’ve got to decide. You have to ask yourself, “Why? What are those things? How real are they?” There’s a woman I know who was able to get herself out of a severe depression just by asking herself these things that are going through your mind. How do you know that they’re true? And what if their opposite is true? In other words, she learned how to think herself out of those mental worlds just by asking these two questions. It’s interesting, because that’s John Lee’s approach to wisdom. When any insight comes up in your meditation, he asks you, “What if the opposite is true?” So you’ve got to learn how to turn your thoughts inside out like this. Some people find it easy just to settle down with a breath and be right here. Other people have to go through a lot of thinking, but this is one of the most effective ways. Turn the thought inside out. If there’s a thought that’s in your mind, and it’s a thought that goes through your mind that says you’re being selfish by staying here, ask yourself, “What’s the selfless part about being here? To what extent does my being here help other people?” Then you realize that there are ways that it helps other people. At the very least, if you’re trying to get rid of greed, anger, and delusion, you’re not going to be the only person who benefits. The other people who live with you will benefit as well. If your thoughts tell you that you’ve got to decide something right now, think about why it doesn’t have to be right now. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to question all these imperatives. Listen also to the tone of voice with which some of these thoughts come into your mind. Do you really want to identify with that tone of voice if it’s angry or punishing or whining? You’ve got the choice. Remind yourself that you always have the choice to step out of your thoughts. That’s why we focus on the breath. It’s right here. It’s a sensation, a physical sensation. It’s always present, and you can always learn how to experiment with it. Make it so that it’s comfortable. Make it so that it’s easeful, coming in, soothing, coming in, soothing, going out. When you breathe in, try to think of no tension building up as you breathe in. The energy of the breath just comes in. It’s ready to come in. You don’t have to pull it in. When you breathe out, you don’t have to squeeze it out. It just goes out. When it goes out, it takes all the negative stuff inside out with it. Allow yourself to be soothed by the breath. The mind likes to create worlds for itself. It’ll create a world inside the body of nice breathing. That’s one way of focusing on the body in and of itself. In other words, you’ve just got this sensation of the body here right now. You’re not thinking about how the body relates to anybody else in the world or anything else in the world, what other people think about your body, what you think about your body in terms of how it functions in the world, how it looks, how strong it is, how agile it is. All those issues you can put aside. It’s perfectly fine. All you need is just to have a body right here, right now. That’s all you need for this practice. There was a son of peasants in Thailand and most of his students were sons of peasants. According to the official Thai way of doing things, these were the ones who were really on the bottom of the pile. But he was able to find awakening. He would always convince his students. He would talk to them. You have all that you need for awakening. All you have to have is a human body and a human mind. That’s it. That’s what you’ve got. Then you just work with what you’ve got. So you start simply with the bodiness of the body right here, right now. Then you bring in three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness is just the ability to keep this frame of reference in mind. You’re going to stay with just the body. Any other thoughts will pull you off someplace else. You don’t need to go there, no matter how compelling or insistent they are. You can just keep saying, “No, you can be pretty insistent yourself, pretty stubborn yourself.” Say, “No, no, no, I’m going. I’m going to just stay right here.” Then if there are thoughts that say, “This is hopeless. You’re not going to get anywhere,” say, “Well, we’ll find out.” Again, you don’t have to accept every thought that comes in your mind. Don’t believe everything you think. Just notice how the thought arises and passes away, and then come back to the breath. That’s the second quality—alertness, just watching what’s going on. Keeping watch over the breath, how it’s feeling right now, and keeping watch over the mind to make sure that it’s staying here. If it wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Each time you come back, ask yourself, “Could the breath be more comfortable? What would be a really nice, gratifying breath right now?” You don’t have to think of many breaths, just one really nice breath. When that’s done, you say, “What kind of breath would feel good now?” You’re perfectly free to change until you find something that you really do like. Then you can hang out there for a while. That’s where you bring in the third quality, which is ardency, which means that you try to do it skillfully. Stay with the breath skillfully, and if you’ve wandered off, try to bring yourself back skillfully. Notice which ways to bring yourself back work and which ones don’t. How much force do you have to use? Which part of the mind doesn’t want to let go of that other little thought world that pulled you away? Learn to question it. You don’t have to tie up any loose ends yet before you come back to the breath. This is one of the main problems when you meditate. A thought comes up, and you want to take care of the thought. Settle it for any questions that it raises. You don’t have to. Just leave it unanswered. While you’re here, you can be totally irresponsible and as far as everything else is concerned. What you do want to do well is learn how to stay with the breath with skill. Breathe with a sense of real ease. When the mind wanders off, come back in a way that makes you want to come back. This is the part that’s called right effort, giving rise to the desire to do it well, realizing that this is a really good thing to do. This is the basis for all good qualities. If you want wisdom, this is where you start. If you want to develop a strong sense of goodwill and compassion, this is where you start, by learning to be on good terms with your own breath. You can think of the Brahma-Viharas as they relate to the breath. You want the breath to be comfortable. When it’s not, you show it some compassion. Take the time to look into what would be a better breath. When it is going well, show it some empathetic joy. In other words, appreciate the fact that you’re really breathing well. It’s good for the body, good for the mind. It’s healing. As with any healing medicine, it’s going to take time. You can’t just wipe on some cream on a rash and then wipe it right off and hope that it’s going to cure the rash. You put the cream on the rash and let it stay there. Once the mind is with the breath, let it stay here for a while. It may take some time for the healing effect of the breath to really make a difference. So be patient. When it does work well, just keep with it. Keep with it. That change will have some equanimity there. When you learn how to develop this sensitivity to the breath, which attitude is right for any given time, then it’s a lot easier to find the right attitude when you’re dealing with other people and when you’re dealing with issues in your own mind—the parts of the mind that you have to have compassion for, others where you have empathetic joy for, areas where you have to have equanimity. This applies to you, too. So these are the three qualities you bring to the breath—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. How do you deal with any thoughts that come up that would pull you away from this frame of reference? Any greed for the world to be this way or that way, or to have issues of the world settled right now? Just put that aside. Give the mind a chance to be by itself. Look after itself. It’s so rare that you get this opportunity. Don’t let other issues come in and interfere. And as for distress about the world, there may be some things that you’re going to have to deal with. But again, the best way to deal with them is to strengthen your mind. That’s what you’re doing right here. You can’t settle the big issues of your life if you’re feeling frazzled. So no matter how insistent they may seem, they don’t have any business right here, right now. The business right here, right now, is to allow the mind to be by itself, to rest, to strengthen itself so that you can be your own refuge. The Buddha says the Self is its own refuge. Who else could be your refuge? But if you look at yourself and you don’t feel that you can really depend on yourself, well, you can train yourself so you do become more dependable. This is how you do it. You do have this sense of well-being. It becomes more and more a constant feature there in your mind. So that wherever you go, you have this quiet corner, a sense that you can inhabit this spot, feel that you belong here, that you’re at ease here, and that you’re confident. This is how you become your own refuge. This is your spot. Don’t let the world interfere.

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