Dwelling in the Observer

July 8, 2008

Most of you have spent the day on the road, even in the air. So now it’s time to settle down. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Remind yourself you’re right here. In one way of speaking, you’re always here, because wherever you are is here. But now you want to be doubly here. In other words, totally focused on the body, totally focused on the breath. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. Because even though in one sense we’re always here, in another sense we’re not, or often we’re not here. We’re often thinking about something else. The mind creates little worlds for itself. Sometimes they’re totally imaginary. Sometimes they have to do with memories from the past, thoughts about this person, that person, being with that person, being with this person. You’re concerned about the future, worrying about tomorrow or the next day, or down the line. When you’re in those other worlds, even though they’re created here, you’re someplace else. So you want to step back to that part of the mind that is aware of the fact that these creations go on. So you can step outside them. So try to create as much of a home as you can with the breath here in the body. As with any home, you want it to be comfortable. So ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” And then after that breath is done, how about right now? Sometimes the needs of the body will change, so you really have to be on top of it. After a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths, your long breathing may not feel so good anymore, so you change. Try to keep up with the needs of the body. You might find it convenient to start out with one particular spot. It might be the tip of the nose, the middle of your chest, your abdomen, the middle of the head. Any place where you can sense the pressure of the in-breath, the pressure of the out. When does the pressure feel comfortable? When does it not? How can you change things? Sometimes this may involve changing the spot you’re focused on until you find one that you really do feel at home with. And you really can be sensitive to how things feel. You can feel with each breath coming in and each breath going out. Try to be alert to notice when the mind begins to slip off and wanders off into other worlds. You don’t need them right now, and you don’t have to finish them before you leave them. Just let them go, let them go, as they arise and pass away. Then come back and ask yourself, “Well, what could be more interesting about the breath? What way of breathing would be more interesting? What way of breathing would be more comfortable, gratifying, delicious?” Whatever adjective you find compelling. Now, to stay here, you have to protect this state of mind, which requires that you be alert to when the mind begins to slip off. So your attention is not totally implanted in the breath as part of you that’s watching for whatever else might disturb this. This need to be observant like this is important. It’s not only your protection now as you’re meditating, but it’s your protection from all kinds of unskillful states the mind gets itself into. Even something as simple as noticing if the weather is hot. There’ll be a tendency to say, “I’m hot,” which means you’re totally plunged into the heat. But there’s also a part of the mind that can simply observe. There’s heat. And in that act of observing, you’re stepping back a bit. And you find that you suffer less from the heat. This applies not only to physical sensations, but also to emotions. If you can notice, there’s a very strong emotion which refuses to go away. It just keeps repeatedly coming up, coming up, coming up in the mind. This emotion, you don’t have to say, “I’m angry,” or, “I’m upset,” or, “I’m whatever the emotion is.” There is anger. There is upset. And the act of noticing those things is a separate act in the mind, a separate part of the mind. And if you dwell in that, dwelling in the observer, you can protect yourself from getting into that world of anger, the world of suffering. The world of upset, the world of worry, or whatever you’ve got. So even though the worry doesn’t want to go away, you don’t have to separate so much from it. You’re consciously separating yourself from it, which means that you’re not plunged into that world. Now, the more you can remind yourself to go back to the breath, the more you create space for this observer. You create a beachhead in the mind, so that whatever comes up, you don’t have to get plunged into it. You don’t have to be overcome by it. And even though this doesn’t put an absolute end to suffering right away, if you’re able, it gives you a place where you can step out of it, no matter what the conditions are outside or even inside the mind. You’ve got what Ajahn Fuen used to call your own air-conditioned room. You know these conditions are there, but you have a place where you can step out of them. You don’t have to suffer from them as much. So as you’re meditating, try to develop this habit of dwelling with the observer. You’re watching the breath, but you’re also watching the mind. This quality is called sampajjana, alertness. It not only enables you to pull out of distractions, but it also enables you to be aware of the concentration. But also, as your concentration gets more established, it enables you to observe the concentration, to see where it could be improved, to see where it could be made deeper, more stable. And ultimately, when it’s stable, to see how it can be liberated even from the concentration. So it’s a good habit to develop, to be watchful, alert, as you meditate, to develop this sense of the observer, in Thai they call it puru, what’s observant, or duaru, the awareness that’s separate from the object of the awareness, to learn how to observe your mind in this way, to realize it’s there, to realize that even the simple act of observing it, if there’s suffering going on in the mind, helps to pull you out of the suffering. If there’s happiness in the mind, it reminds you not to get sucked into the happiness, because often that little world of happiness can change on you. It reminds you that there’s a much greater pleasure, a much greater sense of well-being, when you don’t have to go plunge into these worlds. They’re very unstable. They require a lot of effort to keep them going. The pleasure they give is always mixed with stress. There’s much less stress in simply being with the breath and watching these worlds as they arise, and stay for a while, move around, change, and finally pass away. You’ve got a much better place to stay. So use the breath as the foundation for this sense of the observer. Try to inhabit the breath as much as possible. If you’re going to inhabit a world, inhabit the world of the body breathing, the whole body breathing. Think of the breath coming in and out through every pore. If any part of the body feels tight or tense, think of the breath coming right in, right there. Remind yourself that that is breath energy of a sort. Let it be refreshed. Let it be nourished so that the whole body is saturated with breath each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. It’s a pleasurable breath, a full breath. Try not to squeeze it out. It comes in and goes out with a sense of fullness all the way in, all the way out. That’s what nourishes this sense of the observer. As John Foreman used to say, the sense of fullness is what lubricates the meditation so it doesn’t grow dry. It feels satisfying, refreshing, just to stay here, so that you’re fully inhabiting right here. And wherever you go, you learn that you can fully inhabit right here, that you’re always coming from a position of solidity and strength, a position of deep well-being.

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