Refuge

March 30, 2009

Breathe in a way that the mind can settle down with. In the very beginning, this may mean taking good long, deep in-and-out breaths that clear out all your energy channels. Make sure that the breath is perfectly obvious here in the present moment. And as you find that you can settle in, then allow the breath to get more subtle. You’ve got to create a good, safe place here, a strong place, a solid place for the mind to stay, because otherwise it goes wandering off into areas where it can get itself into trouble. Start thinking about the past, thinking about the future, and there’s trouble in both directions. One way to keep you from wandering off that way is that chant we had just now, thinking of all living beings. It helps give you perspective. For the most part, we’re here because of the fact that there is suffering in our lives, there’s stress. Blatant, out-and-out suffering or just the constant wearing of stress. And we realize something has to be done about it. Suffering is a very private thing. The pains that you have, nobody else can feel. We can sympathize, we can think in our minds of what it might be like, but for each of us, it’s our own private pain. There’s that passage where Ratabala, the monk, asks the king, even though he’s a king, he’s got all kinds of power, but when he’s ill, can he order his courtiers to share out his pain so he doesn’t have to bear so much? Of course, he can’t. And a lot of the sting of the pain is the fact that it is so private. It is yours. And so it helps to take some of that away. That sting reminds us that everybody has pain, everybody has suffering. It’s universal. Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. In his first knowledge, he began to remember not only events in this lifetime, but events in previous lifetimes, going way back many eons. Lots of narratives, and the narratives were all about suffering, just death over and over and over again. And the question for him, of course, was, was he the only one who had those many lives? And then he directed his mind to how other people die and other people are born. He found that they, too, go through the same pattern, or just over and over and over again. The whole cosmos, everybody, is going through this. And seeing the whole cosmos enabled him to see that there was a pattern to this. It all depended on people’s actions, the things they did under the influence of their views. If they didn’t view that their actions were important, they tended to act in careless and thoughtless and harmful ways. So not only did they cause suffering for other people, but they suffered themselves. And people acted on skillful intentions, with right view, understanding that action was important, that you had to be careful about what you did. If their actions were more harmless, they themselves suffered less harm, less suffering. And in one way, you could say, seeing that larger picture could have been even more burdensome. It wasn’t just his suffering, it was everybody’s suffering that was going on. But actually, it enabled him to focus down in the present moment with a lot more understanding, realizing it wasn’t just his suffering. Everybody has a narrative where there’s a lot of suffering. So that enabled him to look in the present moment with a lot more objectivity, a lot more understanding. So it’s good to think about all living beings and the fact that everybody’s suffering, and you want everybody to be happy. And you bring that attitude to the present moment. Because not only does it give you perspective on the whole issue of suffering, but also the whole issue of how your meditation is going. If you have difficulties staying with the breath, don’t take it personally. Remember, everybody has trouble settling down, because everybody’s mind has been wandering around for who knows how long. So learn to take it in stride. You don’t get discouraged, but at the same time, you realize there’s work to be done. Because if you’ve been wandering for aeons and aeons, it takes determination not to keep wandering on. And the fact that you’ve been wandering for aeons and aeons, at the very least, you want to find a good place to rest, a safe place, a solid place, which is what the breath is here to provide you with, if you take advantage of it. This is why we practice concentrations, to give the mind a good place to take its stance, where it feels secure. You see some people saying that it’s not necessary to get into good, strong concentration, that you can just start developing insight. But the insight is going to be very unstable if it doesn’t have a good, solid foundation. This is what the concentration provides. So allow yourself to bathe in the breath. Allow the breath to be really comfortable, coming in, going out. Get sensitive to what feels really good right now, because that’s what’s going to help you stay. It takes some interest in this breath energy that’s keeping you alive. When you breathe in, what’s happening? Where do you sense the breathing? Breathing is actually a whole-body process, but you’ll be aware of it more clearly in some parts of the body than in others. So focus on those parts. The breath feels refreshing. It feels energizing coming in, relaxing going out. And again, think of it bathing you all around. It’s not just in one spot. It’s all over the body. So notice where there’s any tension or tightness in the way you sit, the way you hold the body, and allow yourself to sit straight, but with as little tension as possible. Relax into a good posture. You’ll find that it’s easier to stay here for long periods of time, because that’s the whole point of staying for long periods of time. It gives the mind a chance to rest and recuperate. You might think of it as a medicine for the mind. In some medicines, all you have to do is just take one little sip, and the medicine doesn’t do all the rest of the work. Or one little shot in the arm, and the medicine does all the work. Well, it does its work. It takes time. Even though there may be one shot, the medicine has to seep through the blood, and it has to have its effect on the body. You can think of it like a cream that you put on your skin. There’s a rash on your skin, and the cream has to stay there. You don’t just put it on and wipe it off. You put it on and you leave it there. The cream works into your skin, and it soothes the itch, soothes the rash. But it takes time. It’s the same way for the mind to settle down, to begin to heal from the wounds that it’s been suffering from. It’s going to take time. So be patient with it, but persistent. If it wanders off, bring it back and then reward it for coming back. Ask yourself, “What kind of breath would feel really, really good right now?” Give it that kind of breathing. This way you create not only a sense of well-being in the mind, but you’re also developing good qualities in the mind. These are the strengths that you need. One of the chants we had just now was about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You take refuge in them in the sense that you take them as examples. See how the Buddha found happiness. He challenges you. He says, “True happiness is possible, and you can do it through your own efforts.” And so you take up that challenge, and you try his instructions to see if they work. You develop the same qualities that he developed—mindfulness, alertness, persistence, concentration. And as you stay with the breath, you develop these qualities, and they become your refuge inside. So if you notice the mind wandering off, you can bring it right back. Your mindfulness and alertness help you with that. And the experience of concentration reminds you that coming back really is a good thing. It puts the mind in a good place. You try to develop the wisdom that the Buddha developed to see where there’s suffering and what kinds of suffering are totally unnecessary. The fact of being born and living in this world with other people that, like us, are born, grow ill, and die can leave the mind ragged. So it needs to be healed. But a lot of the healing has to come from within, because it’s the way we react to those events that causes all the unnecessary suffering in the mind. So we’re working on developing the skills that we need so we can live in this world and not suffer from it. That’s what the discernment does. It helps you ferret out where the cause of suffering is in the mind and realize that the mind doesn’t have to operate in that way. You can abandon that cause. In other words, you stop acting in certain ways that cause suffering. And then, even though there may be the stress and the pain of aging, illness, and death, it doesn’t make inroads on the mind. The mind has a sense of being separated from these things. In the Canon, they talk about discernment as a knife cutting through all the connections by which suffering comes in. In this way, you really do have refuge. You’ve taken the Buddha as an example, but you’ve developed your own mind so that it can be its own refuge. That’s when your refuge is secure, when you’ve developed these qualities through which the mind can protect itself. So we’re working on a safe spot right here, or a safe place inside, because in the course of time, you develop the strengths of mind that enable you to go beyond stress and suffering altogether. So it starts right here. The breath coming in, the breath going out, and the mind that stays with the breath all the way in and all the way out. Once you’ve established this toehold right here, its influence is going to spread. So it becomes more than just a toehold. It becomes a total foundation for the mind as a whole. It becomes your true refuge.

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