The Importance of Being Focused

May 6, 2009

As you focus on the breath, it often helps to keep reminding yourself of how important the breath is and why it’s important to be able to train the mind to stay with one thing. The breath is important because, after all, it is the breath. It’s the force of life. It’s what keeps the mind and the body together. The quality of the breathing is bound to affect the quality of the health of the body and the health of the mind. So if you’re focused on the breath, try to allow the breath to be comfortable. Just pose that question to the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel best right now?” and see how the body responds. If it doesn’t seem to respond much in any way, you can push it a little bit. Try breathing longer to see how that feels, or shorter to see how that feels. It’s good to start with a couple good long in-and-out breaths just to energize the body, get the circulation going, and then from there you adjust it to see what feels just right. Try breathing faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, heavier, or lighter. You can experiment with focusing the breath in different parts of the body. See which part of the body seems most congenial to stay focused on. And then if something else comes into the mind and says, “You’ve got to think about this, you’ve got to think about that,” you say, “No, right now the breath is more important.” Other issues that command your attention during the rest of the day have had plenty of a chance to get thought about, to get dealt with, and you need to be able to reserve some space, reserve some time for the breath, so it can get its due. Otherwise, things that seem pressing push in, push in, and things that are important get pushed out. It’s so easy to lose perspective. Some issue jumps up at you and says, “You’ve got to take care of me right now.” And often, without thinking, we just go along with it. This is one of the important aspects of meditating, to learn how to say no to things that seem very pressing, very important, very insistent, because you have a different set of priorities, a different set of values. You value the mind. You value the qualities of the mind. So you want to give them first priority. Now you’ve got the chance. You’re sitting here meditating. Nothing else is coming in to demand any media attention. At least, nothing is coming in from the outside. Things may bubble up inside, but you have to learn how to say no, no, no, and learn how to anticipate when the mind is going to slip off. You can stop it before it gets entangled with these things, so you don’t suddenly realize that you’ve been off for, say, five minutes, thinking about some issue on the other side of the world. Learn how to sense when the mind is beginning to leave the breath and then see what you can do to make the breath more interesting. You might want to breathe a little bit more heavily or ask yourself, “I’d be really, really comfortable right now.” Often, that’s one of the problems. The breath starts getting mechanical. Then you begin to lose interest, and something else comes in and seems more important. So when a distraction comes up, don’t get frustrated by it. Simply regard it as an opportunity to develop your skills, to see how quickly you can recognize it, how quickly you can drop it. And when you drop it, you find often that it’ll go away. Sometimes it may come back when you drop it again. If it keeps coming back, then it’s a sign that you have to remind yourself why you don’t want to go there. The drawbacks of getting involved in that kind of thinking. One of the big drawbacks is just the simple fact that you’ve allowed yourself to get persuaded by it, attracted to it, because you give it importance. This question of importance shows that the breath meditation is not just a technique. It also has to do with your values, what’s important in life, what things deserve attention, what things don’t deserve attention. If you really believe that the training of the mind is important, that’s your main argument against going off with these other thoughts. After all, it is the mind that is important. It’s the mind that shapes your experience, both in the sense of choosing what you’re going to pay attention to. Lots and lots of things could get your attention right now. If there’s a pain in some part of the body, you could focus on the pain and get yourself worked up over that. If there’s an issue that arose during the course of the day, you could focus on that and get worked up over that. Those things will then fill your attention. It seems as if they’re the only issues in the world. But what you’ve done is you’ve blocked out other things to emphasize this issue or that issue. As long as the mind is going to do that, it should block out things that are unimportant, things that don’t help, and focus instead on things that will help get the mind under control, will help give rise to a sense of well-being and ease, clarity in the mind. Because you’re going to need this talent, you’re going to need this skill in your everyday life. When emergencies come up, something difficult arises, something shocking arises, and you don’t get tied up in how upset you are or how shocked you are, but you can sit down and say, “Okay, this is what needs to be done.” Focus on what needs to be done. Don’t build up your other reactions. This way, the mind, instead of being its enemy, becomes its own friend, and a friend to other people. If there’s somebody you have to help in an emergency, you can focus totally on what can be done, what needs to be done, and as for the things that can’t be done or can’t be helped, you don’t get worked up over them. You’re learning to develop equanimity for things that are not important and to focus your attention, focus your energy on things that can be changed. This skill will become really handy as you get older, as you start suffering illnesses, and as you approach death. When an illness arises, it’s so easy to get upset about what you suddenly can’t do, how the illness is getting in the way of other things you’d like to do. And that doesn’t help at all. You realize you’ve got these tools, you’ve got this skill of working with the breath to help alleviate the pain, or at the very least to give the mind a place in the body where it can stay, where there is a sense of ease, there is a sense of well-being. So you don’t have to get tied up in the symptoms of the illness. You don’t have to get tied up in narratives about how long the pain has lasted and how long you think it may last, and how upset you are and how you can’t even stand to think about that. Well, don’t think about it. Think about what’s happening right now. How are you relating to the pain right now? How are you relating to the comfortable parts of the body right now? How can you use that sense of comfort to give the mind strength, develop its patience, develop its endurance? Because that’s a large part of developing endurance. It’s not focusing on the difficult things you have to endure, but focusing on your sources of strength, focusing on the skills you have to maximize your strength. And as death approaches, this will be an extremely important skill. I was talking a while back to a man who had to be admitted to an ER. His heart was racing, his blood pressure was way out of line. And as the doctors told him later, they fully expected him to die. It was very close. But he was able to get through. And what he said about the experience, what surprised him was how many distractions there were. He had been practicing meditation, but it obviously hadn’t gotten to the point where he really could stay focused on what he thought should be important, because all these other things were clamoring for his attention. Unfinished business with his family, unfinished business with his work, and all the symptoms that were coming up in the body. The body was doing a lot of unexpected things, making it hard for him to think. And on top of that, just being in an emergency room with all the doctors running around and all the noises and all the other distractions. So it’s important to be able to stay focused on one thing, to decide, “This is where I want to stay. This is what’s important,” and be able to fend off anything else that comes in and gets in the way. So have a sense of how important this skill is. It’s a lifesaver. And even if it doesn’t save this particular life, it saves the life of the mind’s well-being. Just think about it. In the midst of all that distraction that comes when death suddenly faces you, the first thought, of course, always is, “I’m not ready yet. Why is it so soon?” All this unfinished business. The world is unfinished business. Always has been, always will be. Just as you can’t wait for ideal circumstances before you start meditating, you can’t wait for ideal circumstances before you die. So this, in and of itself, is an important skill, learning how to sit down in the midst of an imperfect situation and get the mind to settle down. To get the mind focused. Because at the moment of death, it’s not just a matter of withstanding the pain or withstanding the shock or the disbelief. But you’ve also got to make choices as to where you’re going to focus your mind. And when you find you can’t stay in the body, when you get squeezed out, or as that great deity closes in on you, where are you going to go? Your body is acting up. If there are people around you, they’re probably being hysterical. And in the midst of all that, you’ve got to make good choices to deal with the pain properly, to deal with the fact of leaving the body properly. So the primary ability you’re going to need is this ability to stay focused, to be mindful, to be alert, so that you can use your discernment to deal with the situation as skillfully as possible. So as you’re sitting here, keep reminding yourself of the importance of being focused, maintaining a focus, and of whatever skills you can use to fend off any distractions. Because your well-being depends on it.

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