Many I’s, Many Eyes

October 13, 2009

Focus your attention on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how it feels. Notice how the breath is flowing. See where you find the sensation of the breathing easiest to follow. We’re not just focusing on the breath. We’re not just focusing on the movement of the air in and out of the nose, but on the sensation of the energy flowing through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And that you can focus on anywhere, anywhere in the body at all. Anywhere where you have a good, clear sensation that tells you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” I’m trying to bring two qualities to work here. One is mindfulness, i.e., reminding yourself to stay here. You’re here to watch the breath. You’re not here to think about the day’s events. You’re not here to plan about tomorrow’s events. You’re here to be in the present moment. The breath is the best place to anchor yourself in the present moment. As long as you’re with the breath, you know you’re right here in the present. So keep reminding yourself to stay here. The other quality is alertness, which means actually watching what’s going on. Knowing when you’re breathing in, knowing when you’re breathing out. Noticing when the breath is comfortable, when it’s not. And at the same time, noticing whether your mind is here or not, or whether it’s suddenly taken a mind of its own and gone off someplace else. If you catch the fact that it’s gone off, your mindfulness will tell you, “Okay, remember why you came here. You came here to focus on the breath, so let’s get back.” And then just come right back to the breath. Be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. Reward yourself for coming back by giving yourself one really good, comfortable breath, one that’s really special, that feels gratifying to all the little cells in the body that need breath energy. Then when you’re giving yourself one special breath, what’s to keep you from giving yourself a second one or a third? Keep on rewarding yourself for staying here this way. But don’t get so complacent to think that, “Well, everything is very nice, so I’m going to really stay here this time.” Because whoops, there it goes again. So bring it back again. Don’t get complacent. Don’t get discouraged. Every time the mind wanders off, bring it right back. And as the breath gets more and more comfortable, you can think of that sense of ease spreading through the body. As you breathe in, the whole body feels at ease breathing in. As you breathe out, the whole body feels at ease breathing out. And try not to squeeze the breath energy out as you breathe out. Allow things to feel full as you’re breathing in, and even to maintain that sense of fullness as you breathe out. So the breath energy in the body becomes more solid, more steady. So you notice here there are actually two things you’re watching. One, you’re watching the breath, and two, you’re watching the mind. This is an important part of the meditation. It’s useful while you’re meditating to think of the mind as a committee. It’s not just one person. There are lots of different people in there, and you want to bring them all together to work on the breath. At the same time, keep in mind that when you wander off, you’re not going to be surprised. Otherwise, you might tell yourself, “Hey, I’m here to meditate on the breath. What happened to me?” Well, it’s good to remember that in a committee there are many “I’s.” And depending on how you spell the “I,” that can be a problem or it can be part of the solution to the problem. If you spell the “I” with a capital “I,” then you’ve got lots of different opinions, lots of different ideas about what you want to do here. Some of the “I’s” just want to have a good time. Here it is, a whole hour with no responsibilities. “Hey, let’s go out and travel.” Other “I’s” will say, “Hey, I’ve got all these responsibilities. I’ve got to take care of tomorrow. I’ve got to go to work. I’ve got to think about this. Here’s a good time to think about it.” So there are lots of different possibilities of what you could be thinking about right now. You’ve got to get the “I” who’s made the decision to stay with the breath. You’ve got to get that “I” in charge. This is where the other way of spelling “I” comes in useful. You can think of lots of different “I’s” spelled “E-Y-E” to keep watch on your work. The more of these “I’s” you have working with you, the more quickly you’ll be able to see when the mind has slipped off. And if it’s slipped off, how you can drop that thought, even if it’s in mid-sentence or mid-word, just bring it right back. And then keep watch again. This way you have a system of checks and balances where you have lots of different people inside you cooperating. This is one of the reasons why we want to have a nice, easy sense of breathing, a comfortable, full sense of breathing. Because the more the different identities in your mind are satisfied, pleased with the results of your breathing, the results of your meditation, the more of them will want to cooperate to help keep it going. The more robust your meditation will be. It’s like those computer systems that have lots of redundancies. A failure in one circuit doesn’t bring the whole thing down, because you’ve got alternative circuits that can keep everything going. So think of the mind as having lots of different identities in there and they’re all helping to keep check on one another, to watch over one another. They say that when Ajahn Chah first sent his Western monks over to England, he wanted to make sure that they had a full sangha, four monks. He said that way they’d be embarrassed to do anything wrong, because there’s somebody else watching them all the time, i.e., they’re watching one another. So you want to have the different parts of your mind watching one another. This is how we progress in the path. There are some people who say that you have one self and it’s a bad self. And because it’s a bad self, there’s nothing it can do to pull itself up. It needs an outside power to come in. But if you realize you have lots of selves in here, lots of different identities corresponding to all the different desires you have, some of those desires are skillful, some of them are not. But if you’ve got the skillful ones in charge, they can help each other along, help one another along, keep check on one another, offer advice. Because they can begin to notice, “This works, this doesn’t work.” This way, having lots of committee members actually becomes an aid to your meditation rather than an obstacle. And you develop some really important qualities. You start out simply with alertness, combined with mindfulness, reminding yourself what you came here for, which is to stay with the breath. Keep the mind right here, and then actually watching to see what’s happening. Then combining these with a quality called ardency, which means whatever you do, you try to do it skillfully. In other words, when you bring the mind back to the breath, bring it back skillfully. As you stay with the breath, try to be skillful in your breathing so that it feels good. Then be skillful in evaluating the breath. So it gets more and more satisfying. Be skillful in learning how to spread that sense of ease and well-being and fullness of the body. So you’re not pushing it too hard, you’re not forcing things, but allowing things to seep through the body in a way that feels really good. Then be skillful in maintaining that sense of fullness. As these qualities work together, they turn into a factor of right concentration, evaluation, and awareness. You have this standard against which you want to measure things, and your standards get better and better with practice. This, in turn, develops into a quality of wisdom, which is called analysis of qualities. Seeing what you’re doing, seeing the results of what you’re doing, and getting clearer and clearer on what’s skillful and what’s not. It’s important to remember that you’ve got to keep watch on what you’re doing. Have as many eyes in your mind watching what’s going on. Each different eye has an added perspective, seeing from the front, from the back, from either side, from above and below. Because you want to really see things clearly, you’ve got to see it from all sides. This is why movies are able to deceive us so much, because there’s one camera, there’s one lens, you’re looking at things from one side. That’s why they can build movie sets that don’t have to be complete. It’s just the front of the building, just the façade. As you look in the movie, it looks like the real thing. But if you had a whole series of cameras looking at things from all sides, from all directions, you’d see behind the façades they have these two-by-fours just propping them up, and there’s nothing really there. That would destroy the illusion. It’s the same with the mind. It’s useful to have yourself looking from all sides. I was talking this evening about an incident that Ajahn Fuhring remembered from his childhood. He lived in the town of Jhandvori, which had a lot of gem mines. The French really wanted it, and so they were looking for any excuse to take over the city, take over the province. It so happened that one time there was a Frenchman who had a plantation there who was murdered. So the French moved their warships into the harbor and told the Thai government, “If you don’t find the murderer, we’re going to just take over this place.” So if the police had gone out wearing their police uniforms, they never would have been able to catch the thief. So what the king did was he sent out some spies. Spies dressed as laborers, spies dressed as poor people, on the side of the street. They started talking with other poor people, other laborers. It turns out those were the people who knew. So they were able to catch the murderer, and the French had to back down. So sometimes it’s good to look at things from below. Sometimes it’s good to look at things from above, from either side. So if you have lots of different eyes in your mind, E-Y-E-S, then it actually strengthens your meditation. This is how discernment works. One part of the mind is acting, and other parts of the mind are watching. So you’re very clear about what’s being done, why it was done, and what it leads to. So even though having a committee may be difficult in the beginning, because they’re all pulling in different directions, if you learn how to gather them around the breath—a breath that feels really good, really attractive—you can immediately see the results. So you’re not just going at strength of conviction or the strength of desire, but you’re actually seeing the results. And they all look good from many different perspectives. That’s how you’re going to get the committee to work together so that your meditation can progress. Step by step, as your insight becomes more all-around insight. That’s one of the meanings of the word paññā, or discernment, all-around knowing. So keep watch right here. Keep everybody watching right here. And your meditation is sure to get better and better.

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