Taking Charge

August 3, 2010

Close your eyes and follow the breath. When you breathe in, stay with the breath all the way in. When you breathe out, stay with the breath all the way out. When it’s still between the in-breath and the out-breath, stay with the stillness. In other words, give the mind a place where it can stay, where it doesn’t have to go jumping around. Remember, the mind can settle down, that it can rest. There’s a certain amount of work that’s involved here, and this is what kamatthana is all about. It is work. Because you have to keep watch over the mind. It’s like a child. You want the child to be obedient, and as soon as you turn your attention away, the child goes running off. So you have to be watchful. That’s the work. And you have to be careful to see that. You don’t want to know about the mind’s going off after it’s happened. You want to learn how to notice the signs that it’s about to go away. When it’s focused, it’s going to get a little bit blurry. Try to get on your guard. Watch out. The mind is getting ready to move off, and a thought may appear. And the work then is to learn how not to get involved with the thought. Sometimes you just notice there’s a thought arising, and you remember, “Well, you’re not here to think about those things.” You go back to the breath. But sometimes you’re interested in what’s this thought going to be like. It’s like a little package that appears in the mail. You want to open it up and see what’s inside. And then before you know it, you’re a thousand miles away. That’s why thoughts are even more interesting than packages. A package in the mail can’t take you a thousand miles away. It can make you think of somebody a thousand miles away, but the thought is actually what takes you around the world many times in the course of an hour. But you’ve got to remind yourself, you’ve done that many times before. You’ve been through those worlds many times before. And here you want to see something new. This is where the mind tries to deceive you. It says, “Well, the thought is something new. The breath is old. It’s just in and out, and that’s it.” You say, “No, there’s a lot going on. There’s a lot going on here that I haven’t seen, a lot that I don’t understand yet.” How is it that the thought appears in the mind? How does the mind create thoughts? How does it go into thoughts? When an intention arises in the mind, how does it arise? At what point do you make up your mind that you’re going to go with something? And when the mind chooses to pay attention to different things, who’s doing the choosing? What are its standards? What are its criteria? And most important of all, everything you do is for the sake of happiness, and yet you end up causing yourself suffering. You find yourself weighed down, oppressed, attacked by your own thoughts. How does that happen? And you’re not going to see it anywhere else but by looking right here. All the important things about your own mind are going to appear right here if you watch carefully enough and consistently enough. That’s why the first requirement of meditation is to learn how to be steadily with one object and just let go of everything else that comes up, no matter how important it may be, no matter how much everything depends on those thoughts. At least, they’ll tell you everything depends on them. But you’ve got to realize everything depends on your being mindful and alert, not on the content of the thoughts, but on the skills that you can develop in the mind. So when the mind comes up with reasons why you’ve got to think about this, think about what you’re going to do tomorrow, think about planning for next week, next month, next year, whatever, you tell yourself, “Not right now. I’ve got to get the mind in good shape.” You’ve got to develop the skills that you’ll need tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, learning to be mindful, learning to be alert, learning to develop your discernment. So you can begin to see where the mind is making choices that are going to lead to stress and suffering. And how it can learn not to make those choices. So the first step here is learning how to stay with the breath and let go of everything else. If there’s going to be any thinking in the mind, have it be thinking that keeps directing you back to the breath. We’re not trying to blank out here. After all, as I said, there is work to be done. There is work to be done in maintaining the steadiness of your focus. So that’s the effort. That’s the thinking you want to get involved in. The Buddha said he got on the right track on the path when he just learned how to observe his thoughts to see which ones were helpful and which ones were not. And instead of just jumping into every thought that came his way, opening up every little thought box that appeared in the mail, he learned to look at the box and realize, “Okay, this box is bad news. This box is useful.” That way you can step out of your thoughts and not be burdened by them. You’re more in control. This is one of the reasons we suffer so much, is that we let our thoughts take over and they’ll lead us in all kinds of directions, many times six or seven different places all at once. You’re zipping back and forth, back and forth, trying to keep track of this, that, and the other thing. The mind doesn’t have a chance to settle down and rest and get out of the thoughts and not be so burdened by them, not be oppressed by them. Of course, you do have your duties. There are times when you do have to think about these things, but they shouldn’t be 24/7. This is an important part of the skill in looking after the mind, is realizing how much thinking is actually necessary and how much of it is just wasteful spinning of your wheels. It’s like having a car, and you know that there are times when you’re going to use it. But it doesn’t mean you have to keep the engine running all the time. So you can just jump into it whenever you want. You learn how to turn the car off when you’re not using it, turn it back on when you will. But most of us, the way we run our minds is like keeping the engine running all the time, just in case we may need to use it. And so, of course, what happens is we use up a lot of energy and we find ourselves taking all sorts of unnecessary trips. After all, the car engine is running, so we’ve got to go. So you find yourself running all over the place without stopping to think, “Is this trip necessary? Is this trip useful?” So as far as other thoughts, turn them off right now. They will arise, but you don’t have to go with them. And you can just watch them fall away, fall away. Don’t pay too much attention to them. Stay focused on the breath. Because the more attention you pay to your thoughts, the more they begin to turn into little worlds that you go into and then get sucked off to who knows where. You notice a thought is arising. Just let it be on the fringe of your awareness, but you don’t have to go with it. It’s like someone coming to visit you. If they find that you don’t talk to them, they’ll have to go away. They’ll lose interest. Some of them may be a little stubborn, but again, you don’t have to get involved. This is an important skill you want to learn how to develop, how to say no to your thoughts, how to stay steadily with one thing. Learn how to make that one thing comfortable so it’s good to stay with. In fact, this is one good way of warding off any potential interest in those other thoughts, is asking yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel really good right now?” Would deep breathing feel good? How about shallow or gentle breathing? Fast or slow? Heavy or light? Long or short? These are things you can experiment with. In other words, as long as you’re going to stay with this one thing, you want to make it interesting and you want to make the most out of it. Because the breath, when you really get to know it, has a lot of help that it can offer to the body and can offer to the mind. There are certain ways of breathing that can actually give rise to disease in the body. Other ways of breathing can get rid of those diseases. Certain ways of breathing make your pains in the body worse. Other ways of breathing can dissolve the pains. And when you breathe in, exactly where do you feel the breathing? Have you ever really explored that? Many times we just have a preconceived notion that the breath is just this air that comes in and out of the lungs, the ribcage expands, and the air comes in and goes out the nose. But how about other areas of the body? What kind of energy do you sense in those parts of the body when the breath comes in? Does the energy change when it goes out? Can you sense where the breath feels blocked? Or are there parts of the body that are lacking in breath energy? Hold the thought in mind that you want every part of the nervous system to be involved in the breathing and see how the body responds. Because a lot of times, if the mind allows it, the body will respond. We have our ways of holding the body that can block the breath. So we ask ourselves, “What do I let go of? What do I relax?” So the breath can go, say, down the left side of the back and go down the right side of the back, down through the hips, out the legs, out to the toes. Are the muscles in my feet contracted or are they relaxed? How about the muscles in the hands? Can you just go up the arm, the wrists, the forearms, the elbows? All the way up to the shoulders. And start down at the toes and go working up your feet through the legs, up through your torso, through your neck, into your head. Where are the muscles that are causing unnecessary stress, unnecessary blockage? Can you relax them? If you’re not really sure, you might want to compare the left side of the body with the right side of the body. What’s the difference between the two? Is there some way that you can sense, say, that your right side is more starved of breath energy than the left? In which case, where in the neck, where in the back, where in the head are you holding the muscles, tensing the muscles that block the breath energy in the right? There’s lots to explore here. You don’t actually get interested in the breath. The easier it is not to pay any attention to the thoughts that come along. It’s like you have a really good book that you find really fascinating, and someone else comes in and wants to talk to you while you’re reading, and you really don’t want to talk because the book is so fascinating. Or you’re working on a drawing or working on something that you find really interesting. Someone else comes in and wants to chatter, and if the work is dull, you don’t want to bother. You’re going to very quickly want to talk with them. You’d be happy to put the work aside. But if the work is really fascinating, you don’t want to be bothered. You really want to stick with your work. That’s the kind of attitude you want to have as you work with the breath. Learn how to make the breath interesting. Then as you find that you can get more sensitive to the ins and outs of the breath in this way, you develop the sensitivity needed to really look at your mind. Learn the ins and outs of the mind. How it moves. How it moves in ways where it’s trying to hide something from itself. How you can catch that. What it does when it’s picking up atop it, burdening itself. Of course, the mind doesn’t have hands. It doesn’t have shoulders to pick things up and to put things on. But it still gets weighed down. It looks like what’s weighed down. How does it weigh itself down? It keeps coming back and back and back. It won’t let go of certain thoughts. Why is that? How can you develop a sense of value that allows you to look at that thought and say, “I don’t need to think about that right now”? No matter how much it screams at you and says, “This is really important. This is earth-shattering news. I’ve got to think through it.” You say, “Well, if my mind isn’t in good shape, I can’t think through it properly. Let me get my mind in good shape first. Then we can work with it.” In other words, as you learn how to step away from your thoughts and work with the breath, then when you come back to the thoughts, you should have a better perspective on them. A better sense that you don’t have to get sucked into them. You are the one who’s in charge now. If it’s something that really needs to be thought about, you get the right time and the right place to think about it. When you’ve thought it through as best you can, then you drop it. If you run up against some problem you can’t solve, you say, “Obviously, this is not working right now.” You learn how to drop it. And there are times when, once you’ve dropped it, you let the mind be still, you come back to it, and the solution is a lot clearer than the first time you tried to work through it. In other words, you want to learn how to turn your thoughts off and on. Now, turning them off originally, in the beginning, means just not getting involved. They will arise. You can’t stop them from arising, but you learn how not to get involved, not to get entangled. It’s like the sound of the crickets in the background. You can’t turn that off, but you can decide you’re just not going to pay any attention to it. We do this all the time. So learn how to develop the kind of interest in the breath that allows you to stay with the breath and not get tempted to go running off with other things. And that, you find, is the basis for a skill that really puts you in control. So, as the Buddha says, you learn how to think the thoughts you want to think, and you don’t have to think the thoughts you don’t want to think. That right there is a huge burden off the mind.

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