Meditation for Young People

August 27, 2010

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Let the breath give you some energy. Let it feel good deep down inside. It may seem like a simple thing, but it actually has a huge impact on your body and on your mind. If the breathing feels good, you’re coming from a good place. The body feels refreshed, it feels energized. And that puts the mind in a better mood. It’s something so easy, so simple, and yet we overlook it. We look for our pleasures outside. You look at TV, you look at friends. Nice things to have, fun things to do. We think that’s where our happiness is. And we neglect some of the things that are right inside that are very close and cost no money at all and don’t have to depend on anyone else. So this is a good skill to have, learning how to develop a sense of well-being that comes simply from breathing well. When you come out to a quiet place like this, it’s a good opportunity to get to know your own mind, get to know your own body from inside. Because when you live in society, there’s lots of things to distract you, things outside you want to look at and listen to. Taste, touch, smell. And those things become really important. Because they surround you. Everywhere you look, there’s something to pull your interest in. But here, when you step outside of that, it gives you a chance to look at your own mind. And you have time just to be yourself, to know yourself, and to decide what’s really important, what’s really worthwhile in life. And when you think about it, as you’re sitting here, all the pleasures you had in the past, where are they now? They’re gone. Which means you can’t really depend on them. It’s like potato chips. You have to keep eating and eating and eating, and they’ll never fill you up. And they actually put you in a worse condition. All those high-generated oils get into your bloodstream, and all the salt does weird things to your kidneys. And yet you keep wanting more. So it’s good to get away. Sort of wash that out of your system and see what you’ve got inside that you can depend on. One of the things you realize you can depend on is that you can start looking back at things you did in the past. Times you were kind, times you were not so kind, times you were helpful and generous, times you were stingy, times you were reasonable, times when you were unreasonable. And you want to look at the memory of those things and see what it does to the mind. And you realize that the memories of the times you were good are really energizing. They feel really good that you helped that person, even though you didn’t have to. Or you decided not to hurt somebody, even though you could have, but you said, “No, I’ll hold back. It’s not the kind thing to do.” Those are good memories, really solid memories. As for the memories of the bad things you did, those don’t help you much at all. We don’t like to think about them. We pretend often that they didn’t happen. Yet some places just eat away at the mind. So that’s a big lesson right there. That the really valuable things in life are the good things you do. The problem is that sometimes you don’t have the energy or the desire to do good things. This is where meditation helps. Breathing in a way that’s comfortable gives you energy, that sense of well-being inside that makes it a lot easier to make the right decision. So as you practice just focusing on the good and how the breath feels as it comes in, how it feels as it goes out, and you can experiment. Does longer breathing feel good? How about shorter breathing? Deeper? How does that feel? How about more shallow breathing? Faster or slower? You can try all kinds of breathing. And as you do this, you’re developing a really important skill inside. The good foundation for making sure that you do do the right things. So you can maintain a sense of well-being not just in the body but also in your mind. This is why we have that reflection every evening. “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” You remember, everybody in the world wants to be happy. And some people have some strange ideas about how to do that. But still, that’s something we all have in common, is that we want happiness. And you want to keep that in mind because that helps you hold back when you’re tempted to say something nasty or do something hurtful. That person really wants happiness, just like I want happiness. And if I’m willing to hurt that person’s happiness, that’s opening the way for other people to come in and hurt me. And I can’t complain because I’ve been acting the same way. What kind of world is that? It’s a much better world when you say, “Okay, I respect other people’s happiness, and when they see that I respect theirs, they’re going to respect mine.” It may take a while for them to notice, but still at least you’ve got the memory within yourself that you did the right thing. And that’s a treasure right there. So take some time to get to know your breath. Here it is, coming in and going out all the time. It’s looked after you all this time, ever since you were born. And for the most part, all we do is just depend on it to stay alive. But we don’t realize it offers a lot more. Think of the breath as an energy, not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but energy flowing through your whole body. Your body’s a big sponge. When you breathe in, breath energy comes in and out every pore of your skin. See how that feels when you think that way. And if it feels good, keep it up. Right now, there’s nothing else you have to do. Just work on this skill. Because it’s the skills we develop that help us stay happy in life. People without skill have to go looking for happiness in things. Or they have to go looking for happiness in other people. And those things tend to disappoint you, one way or another. The happiness they provide doesn’t really go deep down inside. But the happiness that comes from realizing your own goodness goes very deep. So you want to learn how to take care of the breath so it can help maintain that sense of goodness and the willingness to always make the good choice. Because sometimes you have to make sacrifices. Sometimes you have to stop yourself from saying something you want to say. You’re doing something you want to do because you know in the long term it’s going to be bad. That’s the beginning of wisdom. The Buddha once said, “This is where wisdom comes from, asking what leads to long-term happiness.” In other words, the short term, what feels good right now may feel bad later on. You don’t want that. You don’t want that kind of pleasure. You want the kind of pleasure that feels good for a long time. Even though it may be hard in the beginning, if it comes out well in the end, you’ve made a good bargain. And learning how to breathe in an easy way, in a comfortable way, in a way that feels full all the way in, feels full all the way out, makes it a lot easier to keep reminding yourself, “Okay, you want to do the right thing. You want to stick with that decision and not feel tired, not feel worn out, not feel exasperated or in a bad mood.” When you find yourself in a bad mood, just stop and take a couple long deep in-and-out breaths and think of it nourishing all the nerves in your body. That’s a little gift to yourself right there. It may not seem much in the beginning, but if you stick with it, you’ll find it feels good deep down inside. So take some time to give your own breath a chance, because it has a lot to offer.

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