Beginning Meditation

March 6, 2011

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the process of breathing. Maybe with the air coming in and out through the nose, the rise and fall of the shoulders, the rise and fall of the chest, the abdomen. There are lots of places in the body where you can feel the breathing. Try to notice where it’s most pronounced, where it’s easiest to feel it. Take note that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And allow that part of the body to feel comfortable. Try not to tense up around it or to squeeze it. Let it have some freedom to find a rhythm that feels really good. You may try experimenting a little bit. If you’ve done a little long breathing now, does it feel good? If it does, stick with it. If not, you can change. Make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Faster, slower. Try to get to know the process of breathing. See how it feels from the inside, and see what feels best. That’s basically all you have to do. The trick is in learning how to do it for a whole hour, for long periods of time, so that being aware of the breath becomes a natural part of your awareness, so that you don’t block it out. Even as you’re focusing on other things, you want to have some sense of how the body feels, how the breath energy in the body feels. Because the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s an energy flow in the body. If the energy flow in the body feels open, free-flowing, you’re putting yourself in a better position. You have more energy physically, and the more energy you have physically, the more energy you have mentally as well. It’s easier to think more clearly when you see that something’s wrong. You have the energy to do it. All too often we can see that something ought to be done, but we don’t have the energy. Or the mind is so clouded, we can’t even see what should be done. A good way of getting around that is to work with the energy in the body like this. Try to make this your default mode and give the body some freedom. So you’re not squeezing it too much, you’re allowing a lot of tension to build up. The trick here is learning how to stay here. It’s not that hard to be aware of the breath for a couple of breaths. But the mind has this tendency to want to go running off. That’s taking care of what’s next. But you haven’t really taken care of it, and you haven’t allowed the breath to do its work on the mind or on the body. Because when the breath energy flows well, it’s healing for the body, healing for the mind. And it’s a good antidote. When you find yourself sleepy, try to breathe more deeply. Give yourself more energy. When you feel restless, allow the breath to calm down. But don’t think too much. Don’t squeeze it so much that you kill it. Allow it to find a right sense of balance. When the Buddha describes the topics of meditation, he says, “You stay focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” The mindfulness here is keeping the breath in mind, and alert is watching it. Watching it as it comes in, watching it as it goes out, and also watching the mind to make sure the mind stays with it, feels at ease with the breath. The ardency is the desire to do it well. Otherwise, you really do give it your full attention. As for other issues that come up, you just put those aside. The Buddha recommends various ways of dealing with the other issues that come up. One is that set of sublime attitudes that we chanted just now—the wish that all beings be happy, be free from stress and pain, that whatever happiness they do have, may they continue having it, and then realizing that there are some things that are beyond your control. Those wishes are not prayers. It’s more setting an intention in mind, trying to develop an attitude that when you’re going to act in any way, either what you do or what you say or what you think, you want these attitudes to inform your motivation. And you want to use them here as you meditate. You may be suddenly remembering something that somebody did, and you feel ill will for the person, or you feel the desire to see them suffer a little bit, or you see somebody who’s enjoying some good fortune that you resent, or there’s something that irritates you about people, maybe nothing really strong, but there’s a sense of irritation. The Buddha has you try to develop these four attitudes as an antidote to those forms of aversion. You’re thinking about how you’d like to see somebody suffer. Spread thoughts of goodwill. May they be happy. Because you’re not going to gain anything from their suffering. Or if there’s somebody that you’ve harmed in the past and it’s hard to think about their person, and all of a sudden the memory shows up in your mind right now, wish them goodwill. May that person be happy. If there are people who are happy and you resent it, remind yourself you’re not going to gain anything from losing their happiness. So may they continue their happiness. And for all the little irritations in the world, you’ve got to develop equanimity. You can’t allow your mind to get worked up over things all the time. It’s a waste of energy, a waste of your time. There are more important things to do in life, particularly when you look into this issue of why does the mind cause itself suffering, even though everything we do is for the sake of happiness. We speak for the sake of happiness. We act for the sake of happiness. We think for the sake of happiness. Yet all too often, the results of our actions turn into pain, suffering, stress. That’s the big problem. That’s why the Buddha made it the topic of his first sermon, which we chanted just now, the stress that we cause ourselves. And in causing stress for ourselves, as we weigh ourselves down, we become a weight on other people. So you want to look into this issue and realize this is really important. So don’t let yourself get distracted by other things. This is an important skill you’re developing right now with the meditation, learning how to stick with the breath. That’s a way of developing the mindfulness and alertness you’re going to need in order to see exactly what it is that you do that causes suffering. What is it that you do that causes stress? It weighs the mind down, puts a squeeze on the mind. The more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the more you’ll be able to see these things. The more ardent you are in applying yourself to this question, the more you’ll be able to solve the problem. So these are the qualities we want to bring to the meditation. Mindfulness, alertness, and ardency are the qualities we’re going to need in order to sort out this issue of how the mind creates stress and suffering for itself. As the Buddha said, all he taught was stress and the ending of stress. Now, to put an end to the stress and suffering, you have to understand how it comes about. So when the Buddha’s focusing on this issue, it’s not that he’s pessimistic. He’s not saying that life is suffering. He said that he’d be involved in all kinds of arguments, but if he simply says, and which is what he did say, that simply there is stress, you can’t argue with that. It’s there. Everybody experiences it. For the most part, we look to the wrong places. To understand why it comes about, we tend to blame things outside, or people outside, situations beyond our control. Well, if it’s beyond our control, there’s nothing you can do about it. But as he points out, the stress and suffering that really weighs down the mind comes from our own craving, comes from our own clinging, comes from our own ignorance. And those are things we can do something about. So as we’re meditating, we’re learning the skills we need in order to do something about that problem. The more you understand that problem, the more other problems just kind of drop away. So if you find the mind slipping off, remind yourself where you’re going. It’s a waste of time. We do have so little time in our lives. Say you live to a hundred years. If you’re on the beginning end of that, it looks like a lot of time. But as you get closer and closer to the end, you realize how little time you actually have. And who knows how much time you’ve got? So you don’t want to waste your time with irrelevant matters. Learn how to take care of this problem. And all the other problems in life just sort themselves out. So you’ve got a whole hour now to work on strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your alertness. Keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath. And as you’re with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible. The more sensitive you can make yourself to the breathing process, the more comfortable it becomes. And that sense of ease begins to seep throughout the body—an energy that feels soothing, that gives you the strength to stay on the path. It’s the technique. Part of it is the technique, but also a large part of it is a sense of value, so why this is important. And learning the values that help keep you with the technique. Goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, a sense of heedfulness. In other words, realizing this is an important issue in life that you’ve got to face. If you don’t face it now, when are you going to face it? Nobody else can solve the problem for you. You’ve got time right now, so make the most of it.

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