Tranquility & Insight Together

December 18, 2011

First step is to get your body in position. Try to get your back comfortably straight. Face forward, close your eyes. Place your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. And then get your mind in position. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and notice how the breathing feels. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how your body feels when you breathe in, how it feels when you breathe out. Where do you notice the differences? Or where are they most noticeable? Try to keep your attention there. Position is not all that hard. It’s staying in position that’s hard. In terms of your physical posture, try to relax into this posture as much as you can. When we say to keep the back straight, it’s not that you have to tense it up and act like a soldier. Ask yourself which muscles are tense that are actually keeping you out of a straight posture, and relax those. See if you can relax into a good posture. The reason we want to keep our balance is that it’s ultimately the easiest posture to maintain, and it’s good for the body. Even harder, though, is keeping the mind in position. It’s usually quick to scout things out and to move off to something else, to scout that out. But here you want to scout out your body in the present moment. You want to do it with a lot more detail, with a lot more awareness and sensitivity than you normally give to it. That means you have to remind yourself to stay here. So it’s partly the determination to stay that’ll keep you here, and the other part is developing an interest, a curiosity, as to how the breathing feels in the body and what ways of breathing feel most comfortable, most appropriate for the body right now. If you’re feeling tired, you want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re feeling tense, you want to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. If you’re feeling sleepy, try to breathe in a way that wakes you up. So on the one hand, you want to be sensitive to the needs of the body. And then on the other hand, you want to be sensitive to what the breath can do. Try to go through your repertoire. For a bit, see what long breathing feels like or short breathing, deep breathing, shallow breathing, faster or slower, heavier or lighter. Then try to see which combination feels best. What may happen is a certain combination will feel good for a while, but then it’s no longer appropriate. The body has certain needs, and when you meet those needs, then its needs get more refined. So try to keep on top of what the body needs right now in terms of the breath. The two things that will pull you away are, on the one hand, thoughts that wander off into the past or the future, distractions of various kinds. If you notice that happening, just drop the thought. Come back to the breath. Find yourself following another thought. It can go on for a little while, but if you’re not paying attention to it, it’ll ultimately just disappear. So keep coming back to the breath, regardless of what you’re thinking. The mind will come up with all kinds of rationales for why this is a good time to think about that problem you’ve encountered at home or the problem you’ve encountered at work. It’s just time to play around. In each case, you have to remind yourself, “Don’t believe those rationales. You’ve been believing them for a long time. It’s something different.” See what it’s like to get the mind to stay alert and mindful in the present moment. The other thing that pulls you away is drowsiness. As things begin to get comfortable, you just let go, but not letting go in the way the Buddha meant. You just lose your awareness, lose your mindfulness and alertness, and sink into a blur of the temporary state. You don’t want that. So as soon as there’s a sense of comfort in the breathing, a sense of comfort in the body, try to explore other parts of the body as well. See if you can develop a sense of comfort there. Or spread the sense of comfort from the center that you’ve chosen to focus on. See how far it can spread. Don’t push it or pull it too much. Allow it to seep through, like water seeping through rock, seeping through sandstone. Just spreading, spreading, spreading. In other words, once there’s a sense of comfort, you’ve got to work with it. You can’t just lie there and wallow in the comfort. Otherwise, you’ll lose your focus on the breath and go into either a state of drowsiness and sleepiness, or what’s called delusion concentration, where things are quiet but there’s no real mindfulness, no real alertness. So you’ve got to be on the alert for these two different ways that the mind loses its focus. What it comes down to, basically, is a lack of energy on one side and too much energy on the other. So if there’s too much energy, try to devote it to really being sensitive. That’s where the effort is in the concentration. It’s trying to be as sensitive as possible to how things are going with the breath, how things are going with the body, how things are going with the mind. As long as you’ve got that energy, put it to use in helping you to get the mind to settle down. When there’s a lack of energy, what can you do to develop a sense of more interest in the present moment? Because sometimes a sense of sleepiness is not really caused by genuine sleepiness. It’s just that the mind is getting bored and it’s finding some excuse to wander off. So try to develop as much interest, again, in how the breath is going and how far you can go. You have to develop in order to stay here, stay in position. The first is the desire to do it, reminding yourself of why you’re here to meditate. You’re looking for a different source of happiness from the normal happiness of following things outside, the happiness that comes from allowing the mind to come to peace and then to understand itself, understand the ways in which it’s disturbing itself, creating unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering. So remind yourself that this is a good thing to be doing, this is a good skill to master. The second quality is persistence, putting energy into this and maintaining a steady level of energy. You don’t want to throw all your strength into it for five minutes and then get exhausted. Find how much energy you can put into being attentive, to watching over things, that kind of energy that you can maintain. When things are going right, the level of ease and well-being that comes from getting the mind concentrated will get more and more self-sustaining. But until it reaches that self-sustaining level, you have to put energy in. The main energy you want to use, though, is this energy of being sensitive, quick to notice what’s going on. The next level is the next quality of mind that you want to develop. The third quality is interest, being really intent on what you’re doing, watching what’s happening, and wanting to find out, if things are not going well, what’s going on. And then finally, you use your ingenuity, your resourcefulness. If things are not going well, what can you do to get them better? It’s the problem with the brain. If the problem is with the breath, it’s the problem with where you’re focused. You might change the place where you’re focused. If the problem is with the breath, try changing the way you breathe. How about the level of energy you’re putting in? Try to gauge what’s happening and then make adjustments. In the beginning, it’s going to be difficult if you’re not familiar with the processes of meditation. But as you get more and more familiar, you’ve got experience to draw on. They talk about bringing a beginner’s mind to the practice. To some extent, that’s good. You want to be fresh each time you meditate. But at the same time, you want to remember that you’ve learned lessons in the past. Meditation is not a crapshoot. It is a skill that you can master. But it’s usually good, at the end of each meditation period, to stop and reflect for a few moments. When things went well, where were you focused? What was the quality of the breath? What had you done leading up to that? If you’re mindful and alert, you’ll notice. And then you’ll be able to use that knowledge the next time you meditate. Now, you may not be able to recreate that state precisely, but at least you’ve got some idea of the direction in which you’re going, where the mind likes to settle down, where it likes to develop a certain kind of breathing. You have to question some of the things you’ve learned in meditation instructions about where you should focus or what kind of breathing should be good. I was reading a letter recently where someone was complaining that he’d been told that as the mind settles down, the breath gets shorter and shorter and more refined. But he’s noticed that when his breath gets shorter, it’s not refined at all. So it’s not necessary that short breathing is good. Sometimes long, refined breathing is more soothing and more appropriate for the body. So you have to explore. This is what the discernment is all about. They talk about getting the mind to get still, develop tranquility, and then also to gain insight, which is the discernment property of the meditation. And it’s not just knowing things in books. It’s actually noticing what’s happening and noticing the results. You want to notice both distinctions and connections. The connections are when you do x, what happens as a result. You want to see the connection between cause and effect. When you focus in a certain way, when you breathe in a certain way, what happens? When you bring a certain attitude to the meditation, what happens? That’s noticing connections. And then gauging what happens as a result. Is it good or not? That’s seeing distinctions. So you want to be sensitive to both. In some cases, what you’ve learned from books or heard from Dhamma talks will be helpful, but it’s using your own powers of observation that develops a sensitivity when you can see these things actually happening. So you begin to ferret out. This way of breathing, this way of focusing, is better than that way. That’s the kind of distinction you want to see. In other words, you see which connections are the connections you want to foster and which ones that you want to let go of. And you can do that only when the mind settles down. Now, your level of insight is going to develop as the mind gets more and more quiet. It’s not the case that you have to get the mind really, totally still before any insight is going to arise. It’s simply that when you have a shallow level of calm, you get a shallow level of insight. And then as the calm deepens, the insight will deepen as well. And the insight will help the calm as you understand the mind more and as you’re quicker to notice, “Okay, this way of breathing is not working. Let’s try that breathing instead.” The insight helps to develop the calm. So the two of them work together. This is why the Buddha said they actually should be practiced in tandem. You’re trying to figure out what ways of adjusting the present lead to a greater state of stillness. You’re developing both concentration and discernment, or both tranquility and insight at the same time. It’s an insight into action. What are you doing and what are the results? And which ways of doing are better than the other ones? So again, it’s both seeing connections and seeing distinctions that’ll enable the mind to settle down and gain a greater sense of well-being and a greater understanding of what’s going on. So you can start tackling the big problems in life. Why is there suffering? Even though we act so as to gain a greater sense of ease and well-being, why is it that our actions so often cause more suffering and stress? What are we not noticing? What’s the ignorance that’s creating all these problems? How do you put an end to that ignorance? By trying to notice, being observant, being sensitive to what works and what doesn’t work, what’s connected to what, and which whats you want to develop, which ones you want to let go of. It’s good that we’re focused right here, because this is very immediate. If you want to understand your mind, you want to focus on something that’s really close to the mind, like the breath. What’s going on right here in the present moment? Because if you try to gain insight into the past or the future, you’re moving into thought worlds and you’re missing how those thought worlds are being constructed. Whereas if you’re right here at the breath, you begin to see how the thought bubble is beginning to develop, like those bubbles. It’s just a little bubble, a little bubble, then a big bubble with all kinds of details. Why does that happen? When you see how that happens, that’s when you’re gaining the kind of insight that really can give you insight into the problem of suffering, stress, all the stress the mind adds to things that doesn’t really need to be added. So instead of living in the bubbles, you want to see how these bubbles are generated. The Buddha calls the process fermentation. These things come bubbling up in the mind and then they create huge thought worlds that can take you far, far away. So you want to see what’s causing these things to come bubbling up in the mind. And the only way you’re going to see that is if you stay focused right here. So we use the breath to gain a sense of well-being, a sense of stability here, so it feels good to be right here. That makes it a lot easier to understand what’s going on. So you want to both get the mind in position and keep it in position, which are two slightly different skills. But you want to be able to master them both so that the meditation can yield results that really are special. It’s not just relaxation. It’s not just time out. It’s a stilling of the mind so that you can really understand what’s going on and how you can direct what’s going on in the direction you want it to go.

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