Curious about the Present

February 15, 2012

Try to sit comfortably. Keep your back straight. Otherwise, the lungs and the stomach get crushed. Face straight ahead. Close your eyes. Place your hands on your lap. That’s the position for the body. Then there’s the position for the mind. Think thoughts of goodwill, goodwill as a wish for happiness, true happiness, your own true happiness, the happiness of the people around you. That’s why we’re here. We want to find a happiness that doesn’t cause any suffering to anyone else, and that doesn’t leave any room for us to suffer either. So this is a noble quest. John Suat often used to say, “Remember, this is a very high level of work we’re doing here, so it requires a lot of precision, a lot of attention. But the rewards are great, too.” So with those thoughts in mind, take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. You can think bhutto, with a breath. Bhutto means awake. It’s the quality of mind we’re trying to develop. A lot of us spend our time in daydreams. You know what dreaming means? It means you’re asleep. So we want to be awake to what’s happening. We want to see what’s creating the dreams right here, rather than getting lost in the dreams. So we have to stay anchored with the breath, because that’s what keeps us in the present moment, keeps us with the body. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. You know you’re right here. You can’t watch a breath someplace else or any other time. As you breathe in, breathe out, remember, breath here means the energy in the body. And so when we’re breathing in, it’s not so much that we’re breathing energy in. Actually, the energy in the body expands to allow the air to come in. So allow it to expand comfortably, and then when it relaxes, allow it to relax comfortably. Try to make a survey through the different parts of the body while you’re breathing in. Is there any place where tension is building up while you breathe in? If so, allow that tension to relax. See if you can breathe in without the tension. The same when you breathe out. Try not to squeeze the energy out of the body. Allow it to stay full and just let the air go out of the lungs. You can make a survey down the back, out the legs, starting again at the back of the neck, going down the shoulders and out the arms. Notice the movement of that torso in the front, around the lungs, the stomach, the intestines. Try to make it all as comfortable as possible. We’re trying to use the principle of getting interested in the present moment. We’re not tying the mind down to the breath and saying, “Don’t think at all and just stay with the breath and don’t go anywhere.” We’re saying, “Explore the breath. What does the breath feel like? How can you make it comfortable?” Give the mind work to do, something to learn about, something to get curious about. Because as you explore the movement of the breath right now, it gets you more sensitive to the present moment. And as you get more sensitive to the breath, it enables the mind to get more sensitive to its own movements. When the mind is staying in place, what is it like when it’s beginning to move away? How does it move away? How does it lie to itself? In other words, you think you’re here with the breath, but part of the mind has already decided it’s going to go someplace else. Try to catch that. It’s like your mind is a committee, lots of different members in there with lots of different ideas, and you’re trying to get as many of the good members lined up and on your side. And even some of the neutral members, you want to make them more favorably inclined to stay here in the present moment. That’s why we get the breath comfortable. It feels good. It enables you to show yourself. There is pleasure to be found in staying in the present moment. When you’ve made your survey of the body, you might want to make the survey a couple of times to see if there’s anything you missed the first time around. But after a while, you’ll be ready to settle down. Then you just focus on one spot, any spot in the body that feels congenial, feels comfortable, and allow your awareness to spread from that spot to fill the whole body. So you’re aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. What the breath feels then, which parts of the breath energy are not comfortable that you missed before. Allow them to relax. If there are any pains in the body, you don’t have to focus on them. Focus on the good spots, the comfortable spots. John Lee makes a comparison. He says it’s like going into a house where you know that some of the floorboards are rotten. You know enough not to lie down on the rotten spots on the floor. You find other spots where the floorboards are solid. It’s like eating a mango. If you know that there’s a rotten spot in the mango, you don’t eat the rotten spot. You eat the good spot. Most of us are all too used to running to the rotten spot, running to the pains. But we don’t have to. And for the time being, you’re learning a skill that will enable you eventually to look into the pain with a lot less sense of being threatened by the pain or overwhelmed by the pain. Because you know you’ve got a good spot you can go to in the body, a place where it’s comfortable, good breath energy that you can focus on. That changes the balance of power inside the mind, inside the body. So allow yourself to stay with the breath. Explore what it’s like to breathe with the whole body. You have no other responsibilities right now, no other things you have to think about or plan. Take the time to explore what you’ve got right here. Of course, one of the things you’ll see is that the mind is not going to stay. It’s going to wander off. If it does wander off, as soon as you catch it, bring it back. The Buddha says we’re developing three qualities here. There’s mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. In this case, you’re keeping the breath in mind. Then there’s alertness, which means you watch and you see what’s actually happening. You see what’s happening in the breath, you see what’s happening with the mind. And then there’s ardency, which means you try to do this really skillfully. Which is to say that if you’re with the breath, you try to be very, very sensitive to how the breath feels. When the mind wanders off, you try to be very, very alert and try to come back as quickly as you can. And when you come back, reward yourself with some nice breathing. If you get upset with yourself for going off and get angry with yourself, it’s going to be unpleasant to come back. And the next time around the mind will go further away. It doesn’t want to come back. So each time you come back to the breath, take a really nice, comfortable, gratifying breath. That’s a reward for returning. And after a while the mind will be more inclined to come back, because that’s a good place to be. And there are things to learn here, things to explore. How your awareness relates to the present moment, when it’s going to leave the present moment, how does it do it. And this is why concentration is so important, the ability to stay in the present moment. Because otherwise you can’t see those things. If the mind isn’t really still, really stable, then you won’t see the subtle movements in the mind. And if you can’t see the subtle movements in the mind, you won’t be able to see how the mind creates suffering, creates unnecessary suffering for itself. So we try to make things very, very still. And watch. Ask questions. This is a place to explore. The Buddha always encouraged his students to ask questions, because it’s only through asking questions that you understand. So you ask questions of the teacher, but you also ask questions of yourself. What are you doing? What are the results? Do you like the results? If you don’t like the results, how do you change what you’re doing to get better results? It’s like any skill. And it’s important that the questions of the teacher help you to understand the mind, to capture your imagination. That’s why we made that determination at the beginning. We’re here to find true happiness. This is something really important. If you can’t take your own happiness seriously, what are you going to take seriously? And if you can’t figure out how to find happiness, what are you figuring out in this world? So it’s right here that we learn why the mind causes suffering and how it can change its habits so that it creates happiness in any situation. After all, you can suffer in any situation. You want to turn that ability around so that you can have a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, in any situation. So here you have the whole hour to explore the mind, to explore how your breathing feels in the different parts of the body, what impact different ways of breathing are going to have on how the body feels, what impact different ways of breathing are going to have on how the mind feels—all of which are really basic issues that we tend to overlook. So now we have the chance to look at them directly and learn the lessons that can be learned here in the present moment, watching the mind as it creates stress and suffering for itself, but then asking, “Well, how can you change those habits so it’s creating happiness?” The raw materials are all here. It all lies in the skill with which you put them together. So here’s a chance to gain some mastery in this skill.

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