Control over the Mind

April 3, 2012

Get your body in position. Try to sit up straight, hands on your lap, face forward, and close your eyes. Then try to get your mind in position. Start with thoughts of goodwill, like we chanted just now. Tell yourself, “May I be happy. May all beings be happy.” Think about that in terms of true happiness—a happiness that doesn’t change, a happiness that doesn’t disappoint you. That’s going to have to be found inside, and it’s going to take some work. That’s why we have to meditate. But the good thing about it is that your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s. Like ordinary, everyday happiness, where if you gain something, somebody else loses, or if they gain, you lose. This kind of happiness everybody gains. So when you think about your own happiness, it’s not a selfish thought. When you think about your own true happiness and the happiness of others, there’s no conflict. Then take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. We’re going to stay focused on the breath for the rest of the hour. That’s the position you really want to be in right now, right here. When you breathe in, notice where you feel the breathing in the body. When we talk about breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s more the flow of energy that brings the air in and lets it go out. So as you breathe, notice where you feel that. Maybe anywhere in the torso, in your shoulders, in your back, in your chest, stomach, abdomen. You may even feel it in different parts of your arms, your legs, your head, because this energy flow goes through the whole nervous system. But focus first on the areas where it’s obvious, where you can see it clearly. Then try to observe as it’s comfortable. If you have trouble deciding whether it’s comfortable or not, change the way you breathe. Try shorter breathing for a while, or longer, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. See how the body responds. See which kind of breathing feels best for your body right now. Then try to maintain that. You may find that the needs of the body change after a while. After a bout of good, long, deep breathing, maybe it doesn’t need so much oxygen. So let it calm down. Or if the breath gets too refined, you may have trouble following it, so you may want to breathe a little more heavily. In other words, keep adjusting, keep tinkering with the breath. It’s in this way that we train the mind. On the one hand, we’re developing very important qualities in the mind—mindfulness, alertness, and a quality of the Buddha called ardency. Mindfulness is your ability to keep something in mind. Like when you make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath, you try to remember that, don’t forget. And if you do forget, then as soon as you’ve realized that you’ve forgotten, come right back to the breath. Each time you come back, try to breathe in a way that’s especially comfortable, especially satisfying, as a reward for coming back. Don’t get too hard on yourself for having wandered off after all. Training the mind in new habits is like training a puppy. You want to be firm but friendly. Otherwise, the puppy won’t want to learn the lesson. Or, if you’re too friendly and not firm enough, no teaching happens. So you keep coming back, coming back. Alertness is what watches what’s going on and sees clearly what’s going on. When you’re with the breath, how it feels. And you try to gain a sense of your mind. When the mind is with the breath, is it a little wobbly or is it secure? Is it solid? If it’s about to go off, can you detect that? If you can, breathe a little more deeply. Think of the whole body breathing, energy going out to every cell in every part of the body, or breathing in and out through every pore. Try that for a while. In other words, experiment, explore. If you simply tie the mind down to the breath without giving it something to explore, it’s going to get bored very quickly and find all sorts of ways of slipping out of the knot. So give it something to play with. Think of the breath coming in. When the breath comes in, does the energy in the body go down or does it go up? Which feels better? The quality of ardency is when you try to do this as skillfully as you can. You give it as much attention as you can. And because we’re working on making the breath comfortable, one of the immediate rewards is that there’s a sense of ease and well-being in the body. If you’re feeling tense, what kind of breathing is going to make you feel more relaxed? Experiment and see. Or if you’re feeling tired, if you’ve been on the road all day, what kind of breathing will give you some more energy? If your mind is flying all over the place, what kind of breathing will give you a greater sense of solidity, stability, right here? When you develop this sense of well-being, you’ve got a good foundation for the mind, a good foundation for getting your mind more under your control. Because you realize that the most important factor in your life is your mind. That chant we had just now that sounded kind of depressing—aging, illness, death, and separation—things we don’t like to think about. But they’re there. Whether we think about them or don’t think about them, they’re there in the world. But then there’s that fifth recollection. We’re the owner of our actions. That’s where the hope lies. In other words, our actions or hope for happiness lies in what we do, what we say, what we think. That’s where we have some control. Or we can exert some control. Many of us just let our minds wander all over the place because it’s the mind that determines what you’re going to do and say and think. And if you want some happiness in life, you’ve got to get this most important part under your control. So it goes where you want and does what you want. If your mind is out of control, it’s like giving your car over to a crazy person to drive. The crazy person is totally out of control, pays attention for a while, then doesn’t pay any attention. Gets distracted here, distracted there. He’s going to run into somebody or run off the road. So you’ve got to get your driver under control. This is why we need these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, so we can give some more focus to the mind. So the mind really can concentrate on what it sees as most important, and it can stay there. Anything else that comes up, you’ll now put it aside. This is one of the basic lessons you’re going to have to learn as you try to stay with the breath. All kinds of other thoughts are going to come into the mind. And you have to learn how to sidestep them, how not to get carried away, to be able to step back from them. All too often we’re like a person standing on the side of a road and somebody comes driving up in a car and says, “Hey, jump in. Let’s go.” And we jump in. And only after we’re in the car do we ask, “Well, who are you? Where are you going?” The idea of going someplace seemed attractive, but then you realize that some drivers don’t have your best interest in mind. So what you need is a good, solid place to stay so that when the driver comes up and invites you, you can say, “Wait a minute. Who are you? Where are you going? Do I really want to go with you? Can I trust you?” This is what the breath provides when you learn how to make the most of it. It’s coming in and going out all the time, keeping you alive all the time. It’s nourishing the different parts of the body to some extent, but if you learn how to stay with it and explore the energy in the different parts of the body, you begin to realize you can gain more benefit out of the breath than just keeping you alive. It can provide you with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of fullness in the body, if you pay it some attention. So when other thoughts come up, you can ask them. When other urges come up, you don’t have to run with them, because you’ve got a good place to stay. Especially when you can take this sense of ease in the breath and let it spread out so it permeates the whole body, so it fuses the whole body. Then you’re more in control. The word “control” often has a bad connotation. Think about control freaks. Those are the people who try to control the wrong things in the wrong way. That’s what’s freakish about them. But intelligent control knows where to start and how to control effectively. So when greed, anger, and aversion arise in the mind, you don’t just clamp down on them or give in to them. You realize you have other alternatives. Tightness in your stomach or tightness in your chest. You can use the breath to breathe through that sense of tightness. Because all too often the reason we give in to the anger is because we feel we have to get this tightness out of our system. The thought has gotten into the body where it creates a lot of dis-ease. We’re afraid that if we don’t get it out of our system, we’re going to bottle it up and it’s going to turn into the thing. It goes underground and then comes up with weird tentacles someplace else. But when you learn how to work with that breath energy in the body, you realize you have another alternative. You can breathe through the tension. Dissolve that sense of tension or tightness away. And when the body doesn’t feel overwhelmed by the anger, then you can actually look at the situation and see what would be the best thing to say now. Because you’re thinking more clearly. You’re not stressed by the tension. You’re not being pushed. You’re more in charge. Because you’re coming from a sense of well-being. It’s like that old story about the man with the cloak. And the wind and the sun get into an argument about which one of them is more powerful. And the wind says, “I can blow that cloak right off that man.” Let’s see who’s better at getting the cloak off the man. So the wind blows and blows and blows. Of course, the more it blows, the more the man holds the cloak more tightly to himself. So the wind gives up, and then it’s the sun’s turn. And the sun just beams. And as it gets warmer and warmer, the man takes the cloak off himself. In other words, if you’re going to exert control over the mind, you have to give it a sense of well-being. Otherwise, it’s going to go looking for whatever little scraps it can find. So take this hour to explore the energy in your body, the different ways the energy flows as you breathe in, how it flows when you breathe out. How do you notice when the breath is getting too long? How do you notice when the breath is too short? How do you notice when it’s too long? There’s a sense of strain toward the end of the breath. You have the strain of trying to push a little extra breath in or trying to squeeze a little bit out. If you notice that happening, just drop that. You don’t have to push. You don’t have to squeeze. Just think, “Allow.” Allow the breath to come in. Allow it to stop when there’s a sense of enough. Allow it to go out again. Adjust. Observe. Evaluate what’s going on inside. Try to be more sensitive to what feels good inside. In other words, take advantage of what you’ve already got. Explore the potentials of what you already have. And you’ll find that they have an awful lot to offer, much more than you might have thought.

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