A Solid Grounding in the Breath

May 27, 2012

Stay focused on the breath. You’re in an excellent place for developing all kinds of good qualities. You can develop mindfulness, the practice of keeping the breath in mind, not wandering off to something else. Alertness, being very observant of the breath. All the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, they all come right here as you evaluate the breath. That’s when you begin to move from the mindfulness practice into concentration practice. There are no clear dividing lines. Some people think, “Well, there’s jhana practice, and then there’s vipassana practice, or mindfulness practice,” as if there was something different. They’re actually all aspects of this one practice. You’re heading the mind to settle down, staying very observant of the mind, very observant of the breath. Because when you’re with the breath, the feelings that come from being focused on the breath are right there. The mind states of mindfulness and alertness that keep you with the breath, they’re right there as well. And then all the activity you have to do in order to keep the mind with the breath and to fend off any other distractions. That activity is right here, too. You’ve got all four frames of reference right here at the breath, and it’s a matter of which one you’re going to focus on. The Buddha illustrates this with an analogy. It’s like a person sitting looking at a person lying down, or a person standing up looking at a person sitting. In other words, you step back a bit and you can watch the mind. In the beginning, it’s hard. It’s hard enough just to stay with the breath. It’s like playing the piano. In the beginning, you’re having trouble just getting the notes right. And then after a while, you’ve got the notes right. That’s when you can begin to listen. What’s the quality? What’s the phrasing? How is your pedaling? How is your touch as you play with the keys on the piano? In other words, as you get better and better at this, you can see larger dimensions of what you’re doing. And that’s where the insight comes in. But you don’t leave the breath. In order to gain insight, you don’t leave the breath. For other purposes, if you start wandering off to feelings and you’re not grounded in the breath, who knows where you’re going to go. You can curl up in a little tiny feeling of well-being. Either that, or you lose your foundation for the feelings to begin with. If you follow mind states, it’s very easy for them, once they’ve lost their moorings or the breath, to go drifting away someplace else. So it’s imperative that you learn how to stay with the breath, regardless of what other quality you’re trying to develop in the mind. The breath here, of course, refers not only to the in-and-out breath, but to the sense of bodily fabrication throughout the body, the impact that the breath has on different parts of the body, on the wind element, the fire element, the water element. All these aspects of the body, you want to be really alert to these. You don’t want to start drifting away from the body and just look at the mind, because the body provides your anchor. Some people find that as they get the mind to begin to settle down, it drifts away from the body without having done the work that needs to be done. In other words, looking at what’s going on in terms of the breath energy and the different parts of the body. You want to stay right here and do your best to increase your alertness right here. If you find that you’re getting drowsy, put more emphasis on being fully aware of the whole body, whole body, whole body, all at once. Exert some energy in the practice at that point to stay anchored here so you don’t go drifting off. It’s in this way that your alertness gets really expanded, your mindfulness gets strengthened, and you’re firmly grounded. Then as you get up from the meditation, it’s important that you try to maintain continuity. Don’t just throw away what you’ve just got. Chan Chah gives an analogy of planting a tree, and then three days later digging it up and planting it someplace else, and then three days later digging it up and planting it someplace else. It’s like, in no time at all, the tree’s going to die. It’s the same with your meditation. Whether the circumstances are good or not, you want to try your best to maintain a sense of continuity, being observant, observant, observant, grounded, grounded, grounded in the breath. Just keep coming back here, coming back here, coming back here. Because when the mind drifts away, that’s a state of becoming. And if you’re not clear about what’s happening, there you go. More becoming, more suffering. You’ve missed the chance to see how ignorance and craving and clinging to all these other factors in the mind went into creating that state of becoming. That may seem pleasant enough, but that’s because you’re not really paying careful attention. There is stress there. In fact, that’s the primary example of stress, is how the mind wanders off, creates new worlds for itself. So you might think of these worlds of becoming as they get formed, as balloons. And you’re staying grounded. Okay, the balloon goes away, but you don’t try to get into the balloon. Or they’re like bubbles. You don’t want to get into the bubble. They’ll carry you for a while, and then they’ll burst. So think of yourself as being grounded regardless. Have this sense of your awareness being staked down into the body. Regardless of what comes up, you’re not going to go with it. You’re going to stay right here. Work through all the issues that may come up with regard to the breath, because it’s only when the breath is totally still throughout the body that you can tell yourself, “Okay, you’ve done the work that needs to be done with regard to the body, and now you can rest.” But the work is not totally done. You have to keep coming back here. And John Lee makes the comparison. If you go into these formless states, you say, “It’s like having had a job and now you’re just living off the income.” But you’re not doing any work. And after a while, the income, of course, is going to run out. So you’ve got to come back, particularly to the self. Have this sense of the breath being still throughout the body, and you’re right here, firmly placed, totally aware all around. Because that’s when you can see things clearly. You try to get the breath to settle down and be still, so the movement of the breath doesn’t get in the way of your observing the movements of the mind. This is the ideal place to observe what’s going on. The Buddha talked about his own practice. He was out of this state of full body awareness, but the breath was still. Then he gained all the knowledges he needed for his awakening. So try to stake out your territory right here and stake down your awareness so it doesn’t go floating away. Then figure out how you can make this pleasant, how you can make this doable. Part of it lies in realizing that you can’t stay with totally still breath all the time. There are times when you have to go back to the regular in and out. You have to go back to the in and out breath, because the body needs it. John Fuhring had a student who was really talented at meditation. She had lost track of him for a while. He’d moved a couple of times and hadn’t sent out news to any of his students. It took her a couple of years to track him down. She was visiting right when I’d come first to see him. I remember one night we were sitting in meditation and he said, “There you are, just sitting with that cool breath all the time. You have to learn how to vary the breath. You can’t just stay with cool breath all the time.” Her cool breath was a very still, very subtle breath. The body needs stronger breathing sometimes. So you have to learn how to stay centered in the midst of the stronger breathing. In other words, look for what needs to be supplied to the body in terms of its elements of earth, water, wind, and fire, and what you can do with the breath to get everything into balance. Be energized when it needs to be energized, calmed when it needs to be calmed. There’s work to be done here. You can’t just go curling off into a state of quietude and then come out and complain when this is disturbing you and that’s disturbing you. The work is right there to be done. Maintain your sense of being centered. Have some ballast for the mind. Don’t let the words of other people or the activities around you blow you away. When you can gain a sense of what the body needs and being able to provide for it, the parts of the body that correspond to parts of the mind that have closed off to you, they’ll begin to open up. It’s because they don’t trust you that they stay closed, or you’re afraid of dealing with them. That’s how the mind drifts off. When you gain a sense of well-being and are able to manage the needs of the breath, the body, and the mind, it’s as if they trust you when they didn’t trust you before. They’re used to being mistreated, so they close off. Other parts that you know are hard to deal with and you just try to avoid them. When you gain a sense of skill, a sense of the proper touch in dealing with these elements, things in the body and the mind are going to open up. That’s why it’s so important that you have to stay here, grounded in this sense of the body, all around, from the top of the head down to the toes. And don’t leave. This is your territory. This is where the work needs to be done. So you want to learn how to settle in here and settle in with a sense of belonging, a sense that you like being here, that you know how to handle what comes up. It’ll take time to develop that sense of skill. But once you’ve got it, you find that the insight and the concentration, or the insight and the tranquility, come together. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration all come together right here. You look at the definitions like we chanted just now. The Buddha talks about right effort, and then when he defines right mindfulness, there’s the quality of ardency. Well, ardency turns out to be the element of right effort in mindfulness practice. So right mindfulness contains right effort. It’s not like you do one and then drop it and go on to the next one. You’ve got right effort, then right mindfulness encompasses that. Then right mindfulness is the theme of right concentration. So right mindfulness is contained in right concentration. As the Buddha points out, it’s the fourth jhana that mindfulness and equanimity are purified. So these factors interpenetrate one another. And you want them to interpenetrate one another not only in the definitions in the book, but also in your practice. That’s when everything achieves balance. And it’s only when the mind achieves balance and equipoise like this that really important things begin to open up.

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