Attacking Emotions from Two Sides

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The mind needs refreshment. Otherwise it seizes up like a machine that lacks lubrication. This applies to your life in general and also to the practice. This means that when you’re looking at the way you live, you want to live in a way that’s refreshing. The Buddha talks about observing the precepts. So when you look back on your behavior, you can realize that you haven’t harmed anybody. You haven’t harmed yourself, you haven’t harmed the people around you. Even if other things may be lacking in your life, if you have this sense of your own virtue, that can be refreshing. It provides a good foundation for the practice. But often it’s not. There are other things we need to do in order to refresh the mind. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. It’s one of the few bodily processes that we can exert some control over. This too can refresh the mind at the same time that it refreshes the body. John Lee recommends starting out with some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and then allowing the breath to find a rhythm that feels comfortable. Now, your sense of comfort will vary from day to day. And even in the course of the hour it may change. So you want to stay on top of what does the body really need right now in terms of breath energy. Don’t be in too great a hurry to try to stifle the energy so you can get the breath very subtle. Still, we’re not in a jhana race here. We know that this level of concentration where the breath is still and everything is equanimous is considered to be a higher level than the level in which you’re engaged in pleasure and rapture. But many times you need the pleasure and rapture. The beginning stages are not places just to run through. They’re places where you hang out until you’ve satisfied the needs that that particular stage can satisfy, and then you move on to the next. If things are not yet satisfied, don’t be in too great a hurry to go anywhere. One of the signs of discernment as you practice is when you realize that you need a certain amount of energizing, you need a certain amount of pleasure, just to heal the wounds in the body and the mind. And you’re willing to stick with that for however long it takes. As the Buddha points out, one of the ways of bringing the mind to calm is first by giving it a sense of energy and rapture. The word bhitti here means rapture, means refreshment, a sense of drinking in good energy. So pose that question in the mind. What kind of energy does the body need right now? What would feel really good, really satisfying, really gratifying? Think of the muscles in your torso that have been tightened from lack of breath energy. Think of the energy going all the way down through the torso, through the pelvis, down to the legs, down to the feet. So any part of the body that needs energizing, give it the energy it needs. And however long it needs to be fed like this, just keep on feeding it. There will come a point when you have a sense of enough, that the energy that has to go into feeding is no longer paying back in terms of the rewards of the satisfaction that comes from feeding the mind, feeding the breath, feeding the body in this way. What this means is that the body’s had enough. In John Furing’s images of a large jar of water, as long as the jar is still empty, you want to keep pouring water in. Then when it’s full, you realize that you can keep pouring in water, but you’re not going to get any more to stay in the jar. That’s the time when you want to allow the mind and allow your attention to settle down to a more subtle level. It’s like tuning into a radio station that has music that’s more calming than the one that you’ve been listening to. There’s a different frequency, there’s a different subtlety. But again, don’t be in too great a hurry. Sometimes the body has some long overdue needs that haven’t been met, and it takes a while to get a sense of healthy energy flowing through the body. As long as the body is able to drink in more of this energy, just keep on giving it. This is important. It helps the mind to settle down. It also helps to weaken any other negative emotions you may have going through the mind. These emotions are basically made up of two things. There’s a mental component and there’s a physical component. One way of loosening your attachment to a particularly negative emotion can be to work on the physical component, like we’re doing right here with the breath. Because when the body feels starved and ill at ease, it’s very easy for the mind to latch on to emotions that are negative. Complaining and the sense of the body’s feeling harassed or overburdened or whatever makes those emotions seem all the more real. And you’re going to have an alternative place to stand where you can step back and look at those emotions. So here you are. Feed the breath. Use the breath to feed the body. And as long as the body doesn’t feel totally well-fed yet, you just keep focusing here, focusing here. There may be another part of the mind that’s complaining, saying, “I’ve got this other negative issue I’ve got to deal with.” And you have to be more in charge and say, “No, we’ll deal with that when the body feels satisfied.” The greater sense of well-being in the body. Because what that will do, it’ll help undercut that sense of reality that often attaches itself to a negative emotion. And then you’re in a better position to look at it, to see what the mental component is. What kind of thinking is leading to that emotion? What miserable food are you getting out of that emotion? Because we feed on our emotions just as we feed on the sense of pleasure or pain in the body. And sometimes the mind feels a great sense of satisfaction in feeding on something that’s really rotten. I think of it as a dog who drags in something that you wouldn’t want to even have anywhere near your house. The dog likes to roll in it and chew on it. It asks itself, “Is that the state you want your mind to be in? Are there better things that you can feed on, more nourishing?” And when the breath has been providing you with a sense of fullness and refreshment, it’s a lot easier to pull away and recognize that those negative emotions are not something that’s really worth feeding on at all. You can step back and start thinking in other ways. This is important. All too often we’ve picked up attitudes from our families, from our culture, that can justify us in sticking with something negative like this. We may feel that we’ve been wrong to other people, and that it’s a real satisfaction to think about how wrong you’ve been, because that allows you to pin the blame on other people. Or whatever it is that you find satisfaction in that negative emotion, it’s good to step back and say, “Is this really worth it? Is this really something that’s something you want to believe in?” Our patterns of thought have been shaped so much by wrong viewpoints. It’s good to step back and learn how to question what those attitudes are. Think of what the Buddha might be saying about your emotion. And don’t be too quick to dismiss what he might say. Again, we’re raised in a culture where Buddhism is still something new. But all too often we allow the Dharmi in only in areas where we see fit and we still hold on to a lot of our old attitudes that are far from skillful. So allow yourself to think in different ways. Ask yourself, “What makes this emotion seem so real? What makes it seem so important? What makes it seem so satisfying?” What are the underlying assumptions? Can you put a question mark next to them? How would they stack up, say, against the four Noble Truths? The Buddha would say, “Are you clinging right here? What’s the craving that you’re acting on? These are the things that are causing suffering. Is the suffering worth it? Can you think in another way? Can you find another way? Can you find another way?” And we often find that tackling the emotion, both from the mental side and the physical side, gives you a lot more power over it. All too often we attack it either from the mental or the physical side, but not both together. And we often find that it won’t budge because we’re not covering the complete range. When you can learn how to breathe in a way that’s satisfying, it feels really good, down to the core of whatever the core is inside you. Allow the breath to go into those very tender, secret places inside the body, deep into your heart. Let it provide you with some nourishment there. And as long as the nourishment is in full, stick with this side. You may have to fend off the emotion a little bit to begin with, reminding yourself that you’re not doing any problems by wallowing around in this old dead carcass of an emotion. Sometimes you have to cut it away a little bit like that. There are times when you can’t get the mind to settle down with the breath until you’ve at least thought your way a little bit out of the emotion, enough so you can give yourself some distance. Then you focus with the breath and you find that it puts you in a better position to start thinking about the emotion again. The important thing is to recognize that it is a hindrance. Whether it comes under the five traditional hindrances or it’s a new hindrance that you’ve made up on your own doesn’t really matter. The difficult part of each hindrance is that you tend to side with it. When lust comes, you tend to side with lust. That object you’re thinking about really is attractive. When you’re angry about something, the thing you’re angry about is really justified anger. That’s what you think. It’s the same with all the hindrances. We tend to side with them, which is why they have power over us. But when you can learn how to recognize, “This is a hindrance. I don’t want to identify with it. I don’t want to be overcome by it,” that’s the beginning stage in working yourself free to attack the emotion from both sides. In particular, use what you can with the breath in terms of giving yourself energy. That energy is free. It’s food for the mind that you don’t have to buy from anybody. It all requires that you learn how to breathe. Take advantage of what you’ve got. change the balance of power in the mind.

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