Your Factory Inspectors

June 3, 2012

The Buddha once told a group of monks that they should practice breath meditation. And one of them said, “I already do.” And so the Buddha asked him, “What kind of breath meditation do you do?” And the monk said, “I put aside any concern with the past and any concern with the future, keep my mind equanimous in the present moment, and watch the breath come in and go out.” And the Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but that’s not the kind that gets the best results.” Which may sound surprising, because what the monk described is very similar to what most of us think breath meditation is—that you simply allow the breath to do its own thing and you watch there without trying to get involved in any way. But his instructions, though, are a lot more proactive. After all, our mind is a very active mind. It’s not sitting here passively watching the butterflies fly past. It’s tied up with this body that needs to feed and has lots of other needs as well. And so it’s always on the lookout for what needs to be fed. What needs to be done here? What needs to be done there? Where is there a problem? What can be done to solve the problem? Intention is the driving force in the mind. In fact, as the Buddha said, all phenomena that you would experience are rooted in desire. If there weren’t that desire, you wouldn’t be experiencing things. That’s a pretty radical statement, and it’s important. Because one of the discoveries in the meditation is just that—how much desire shapes the simple fact that you’re aware at the senses. And so the Buddha’s instructions try to make use of that desire and turn it in a skillful way. In fact, all of his teachings are an attempt to focus desire in the right direction so that it leads genuinely to a true happiness rather than to all the false happinesses we’ve encountered in the past. So after telling you to try to be sensitive to the breath coming in and going out, whether it’s long or short, he says you start training yourself. You set up an intention. You’re going to breathe in and out, aware of the whole body. You’re going to breathe in and out, trying to calm the effect of the breath on the body. Breathe in and out, sensitive to rapture, to pleasure, to the effect that the breath perceptions and feelings have on the mind. Then you try to calm that effect as well. There are things you do in the meditation. And so when you’re sitting here with the breath, remind yourself that you are doing something with the breath. So try to do something skillful with it. That means learning how to read your actions and read the results of your actions. If you’re just deciding, “Well, I’ll do this, do this, do this,” and not reading the results, that doesn’t count as insight. Or if you’re sitting here saying, “Well, I’m not feeling so good or I’m feeling good and I don’t know why,” you’ve missed something important. You did something to create those feelings. Sometimes the act of creating those feelings is happening right here and now, and other times it’s the result of something you did a while back. So one of the reasons we focus on the breath is because we can notice what our intentions are. When you’re with the breath, you’re right at the spot where the mind and the body meet. And so anything that comes out of the mind, in terms of an intention to act or speak or think, is going to be sensed right here. And then when you actually follow through that intention, you’ll see. So we’re here both to get the mind a sense of what’s going on, to settle down and be still, and also to gain some insight into what’s really going on. So you learn how to read your actions. As I said this morning, it’s like the mind is a factory coming out with all these different intentions. And you originally set up the factory because you want this factory to create pleasure. And yet for some reason it’s creating pain. Mental pain, physical pain. That’s because the inspectors are not working properly. They’ve left the job and they’re out inspecting other people. This person is good, that person is no good. This place is good, that place is no good. I like it here, I don’t like it here. That kind of inspection. What you’ve got to inspect is the inspector. Is the inspector doing his or her job? If not, bring it back. Notice how the breath is going. How does it create a sense of energy or lack of energy in the body? There are ways of breathing that can stifle your energy. And that’s not what we want. One of the reasons the Buddha has you try to breathe in a way that’s sensitive to rapture is that there is a potential for energy in the body, energy that will enliven you, that will nourish you. And if you’re going to calm the body, you want to nourish it first. You try to calm it when it’s not nourished, it just makes it tired. And a tired body is not going to be helpful to the mind, and a tired mind and body are not going to be useful for gaining any kind of understanding. So try to breathe in a way that feels really refreshing, nourishing. Find the parts of the body that feel like they’re deprived of nourishment. Give them a little bit of nourishment. What would it be like to breathe in a way that gives them a little energy? It requires a fair amount of thinking and visualizing. Well, so be it. That visualizing is part of what they call mental fabrication, and that’s something you want to be sensitive to when you breathe. How are the different ways of thinking about the breath going to be helpful? Thinking about the breath as you breathe in, think of it going down. How does that feel? And when you breathe in, think of the breath going up. How does that feel? Think of it seeping in and out all the pores of your body. How does that feel? In other words, play with your perceptions. See what happens. Learn how to read these things. A large part of the meditation is just in that, learning how to decide where the sun is, whether something really does feel good or not. You’re learning how to be sensitive to an area of the body, an area of your potential awareness that you tend to ignore. Again, the inspectors in the factory are all out interested in things outside. And the factory keeps running along, running along, but without any inspectors who can guarantee what’s being produced. You thought you were creating luxury goods, but you’re creating trash. Or sometimes you are creating luxury goods and you don’t know it. You’ve got to learn how to sensitize yourself here to how you think, how you breathe, and how the way you think about how you breathe is going to have an impact both on the body and on the mind. So have some patience, because you’re going to train yourself in new sensitivities. Look at an area of the body and the mind, or this experience of body and the mind, that you may have ignored before. Get those inspectors in your factory right here. A large part of the meditation is training the inspectors, the part that supervises the work, and then judges the results. Sometimes we’re told we’re not supposed to judge as we meditate, but that’s not what the Buddha taught. He wants you to use your powers of judgment properly. Not on whether this person is good or that person is good, or whether you’re a good or a bad person. That’s not useful judgment at all. The judgment is of actions and the results. Because those things can be changed. The Buddha once said, “You really weigh yourself down. You limit yourself if you try to define yourself. If you decide, ‘I’m good,’ that’s a limitation. If you decide, ‘I’m bad,’ that’s a limitation. If you’re already good, there’s nothing much you can do. If you’re already bad, how can you improve yourself?” So that line of thinking isn’t helpful at all. The line of thinking is, “What am I doing? Why does this action right here, is it something that I want to follow through or not? And if I don’t know, well, let’s give it a try.” Try to judge the results. This is why the Buddha said that evaluation is an important part of concentration practice. Because it’s through your evaluation that you train yourself as to what’s skillful and what’s not. You try to use your ingenuity in thinking up new ways to solve problems as you encounter them. Because those instructions the Buddha gave, even though they are a lot more precise than the ones you’re used to, there’s still a lot of room for your own improvisation. Like any jazz musician, though, you can’t just play and play and play what you feel like playing. You’ve got to have a part of you that notices whether it’s going well or not. There is a discipline in being inventive. And discipline comes from being creative. And being really frank and honest about how well the results are going. If they’re not going well, then no matter how authoritative your teacher may have been, or how great an idea you may have had, or how great it seemed, something’s wrong. Either you’ve misunderstood the instructions, or the instructions weren’t good to begin with. So you come back and try something new. Try to figure out a new way of understanding what’s going on. Do you come across something that really does feel nourishing, really does feel grounding? The mind gets clearer, things are more stable inside, and there’s energy to keep on going. When you come out of the meditation, you should feel refreshed. If you’re not, then you’re doing something wrong. So try to develop your sensitivities, because that’s a lot of what insight is. We read in books that insight means that you see things as being inconstant, stressful, not self. We may have read other books that say that seeing the true nature of the mind as being luminous or seeing that we’re all interconnected or whatever. The Buddha talked about insight more in terms of seeing your actions and the results. Those other topics may or may not become relevant. But the big issue is, what are you doing? What are the results? How can you tell whether the results are good or not? What standards are you using? These are the things you have to investigate as you get more sensitive to this area of where the mind and the body meet. That’s how your discernment grows. And many times it will grow in unexpected ways. But if you find that there’s a greater sense of refreshment, the mind feels lighter, less burdened, you’re doing something right. This is how the meditation becomes a skill.

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