Honest & Observant

June 11, 2012

Let’s start with a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breath. The breath here means the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and out of the lungs. Where do you feel that? What does it feel like? Where does it feel like the breath is coming from? Where is it going to? Try to put aside all your preconceived notions about what happens when you breathe and just look at the actual sensation. Then you can ask yourself if it’s comfortable. You may not know. Well, is it comfortable or not? Try changing it, making it longer, shorter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. Or think about the breath in different ways. Think about it coming in and out through all your pores. Think of your body as a big sponge. Or think of the breath coming in, nourishing the nervous system. Don’t think of it so much as coming in to fill the lungs. Think of it nourishing your nervous system, the big nerves going down. Think of the nerves around your head and face. Think of those being nourished. Think of the breath nourishing your brain. See what these thoughts and perceptions do to the way you actually feel the breath. If it feels really good, you have to develop your own powers of observation here. Because no one else can come and open up your skull and say, “Oh, the breath isn’t going well,” or “You’re not thinking about it rightly.” You have to do it this way. You have to do it that way. You’ve got to do the observation yourself and come to your own conclusions. This is an important part of the practice. You’re learning how to observe your actions. Your actions here mean not only the actions of your body or your words, but also the movements in your mind, the thoughts that come and go, the thoughts that stay. What kind of impact are they having? Is it good or not so good? When you decide to do something, why did you decide to do it? When you did it, what were the results? You’re blind. And yet it’s the most important area where you have to learn how to overcome your blindness. One of the reasons we focus on the breath is because it puts us in a good position to be right here in the present moment to watch what kind of intentions are coming up, to see what layers of discussion are going on in the mind. So we’re watching our intentions and we’re watching our actions. And we’re also watching the way we pay attention. Some things happen in the mind and we give them a lot of scrutiny. Other things happen in the mind and we try to cover them up. That covering up is where we create a lot of problems. If you have a lot of blind spots in the mind, there are going to be a lot of things you miss. This is one of the reasons why a large part of the training is in apprenticeship. You stay with the teacher and the teacher can point things out to you, things that you’ve been missing, things that you haven’t been paying attention to. And a lot of times it’s irritating. You don’t want people noticing that. You figure as long as you’re not noticing it, no one else will notice. Well, that’s not true. And you don’t accomplish anything by hiding things from yourself. But you do have to have the right attitude toward your mistakes. One of them is that error does not mean failure. Just because you make a mistake doesn’t mean you’re doomed or hopeless. If you find that you have that kind of attitude, you’ve got to retrain it. Nobody came to the practice perfect. Even the Buddha made lots of mistakes before he gained his awakening. And how did he gain his awakening? He looked at his actions and he began to notice that there was something not quite right about what he was doing. He said, “Why do I think in this way? Why do I look for my happiness in this way? Why don’t I try something else?” And the reason he gave rise to those questions was because he noticed he wasn’t really happy. There was still some stress. There was still some suffering in his mind. And always the question is, “What am I doing? How can I do it differently?” And this is why he said when he was looking for students that, “He would take on people who were observant and honest.” Those are the two qualities he looked for in a student. Those are the two qualities we’ve got to develop within ourselves if we want to meditate well. Observe what’s going on. Try to be really sensitive. Don’t let your preconceived notions get in the way. This can apply not only to preconceived notions about the breath, but also preconceived notions about shame or error or failure. We think of shame as something that tells us we’re not good. Well, that’s not how the Buddha looked at shame. Shame for him was realizing that you’re better than these actions. You shouldn’t let yourself do them because it’s shameful, because you’re better. The kind of action you find where you’re doing something that’s harmful to yourself or harmful to other people is beneath you. That kind of shame, the Buddha said, is something you should respect. Because you learn from it. And also it allows you to exert some control over yourself. The same with compunction. In other words, the realization that if you do something, it’s going to be harmful. And that sense of a twinge of consciousness that says, “No, I shouldn’t do that.” That’s something you should respect as well. But all too often we smother these attitudes in the mind because we don’t know how to handle them properly. The Buddha says when you make a mistake, recognize you made a mistake and then determine not to repeat it. That’s the best a human being can do. Then you have to learn how to strengthen that resolve. One of the ways is to develop thoughts of goodwill for yourself, for beings around you, all the people you deal with. Wish for their happiness. When you wish for their happiness, can you treat them in a way that’s harmful? If you’re honest, no. The problem is, of course, we tend to be dishonest. This is another area where we tend to cover things up and say, “Well, it doesn’t matter,” or “They’re happy to participate in whatever.” Well, maybe they’re forced to. Or you can say, “It doesn’t really harm them,” or whatever. There are lots of excuses the mind can make for itself. Again, these are ways of being dishonest with yourself. We don’t like that recognition that we’ve made a mistake, and so we try to cover it up. That dooms us to repeat the mistake again and again and again. So if you see you’ve made mistakes in your life, admit it and realize that that’s something you’re ashamed of. Don’t make it a debilitating shame. Make it a healthy shame. This is the shame from which you learn. After all, why are we suffering? We want happiness. We act in ways and speak in ways and think in ways that aim at happiness, and yet we’re not getting the happiness we want. It’s a sign that we’re not doing something right. We’re either not looking carefully at our own actions or we’re not looking carefully at the results. Sometimes we look at how your life is going and say, “Everything is perfectly fine. There’s nothing wrong with it.” Years back I was on a plane with Ajahn Suwat. The third person in that line of seats probably realized that we were Buddhist monks, and he’d probably heard that Buddhism talked about how life is suffering. So the first thing he said, he turned to me and said, “I don’t suffer in my life.” He didn’t even say hello. He said, “I don’t suffer in my life.” Then he started talking about his life. It was a miserable life. His son was in prison, his daughter had gotten knocked up by some junkie, and he’d lived in blight of all places. He was a really blind person, not willing to admit, “Okay, there is suffering in this life, and he really ought to do something about it.” All he could think about was trying to put a good face on everything and then everything would be okay. Well, it’s not. It really wears the mind down. So those are the things you’ve got to learn, how to be honest about what you’re doing, the results you’re getting. No one else can do this for you. Teachers can give examples and give instruction, but there’s always so much to learn. Ultimately, it’s up to you to decide. Have you suffered enough? Have you decided you’ve had enough suffering? Okay, there’s something you can do about it. But it requires that you be honest with yourself so that you can make improvement. This is why, when I was staying with Ajahn Fu, occasionally I’d ask him a question. He’d say, “Haven’t you been observing? Haven’t you been watching? You act as if you don’t know me. I realized that it may have been a topic we had never discussed, but you looked at his actions and his actions told you. But for some reason I hadn’t noticed or wasn’t willing to notice. But I realized he wanted to throw me back at myself so that I could be self-sufficient, I could look at my actions and be a good judge of them, and also have the intention to improve things if I saw that something was lacking.” So that’s what we’re trying to do as we meditate. You put the mind in a position right here where you can watch the mind. You can attend to your intentions. You can attend to the results of your intentions. You develop the mindfulness and the concentration so you can get the mind steady. You try to develop qualities of patience and equanimity so you can sit with things that are unpleasant when you have to, and the ingenuity to figure out when you don’t have to. That way you become a reliable observer and a skilled craftsperson. Those are the two roles you want to play as a meditator. You want to observe things and come to a clear and correct conclusion about what’s going on, and then be able to come up with ways of dealing with problems as they arise, recognizing problems and dealing with them. Those are the qualities you want to bring to the meditation. You can read about the techniques in the books, about where to focus your attention, how to think about the breath. But you’ve got to bring these qualities. If you want the meditation to work.

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