Stilling Mental Fabrication

June 21, 2012

Find your breath, which is more involved than its sounds. Because in the muda-bhava, there’s the obvious breath coming in and going out, and that’s where you start. You want to tune in to these sensations and, for the time being, tune out to everything else. Even in the stharma talk, if you find that it’s getting in the way of being sensitive to your breath, just let the sound go past. Use it as a fence to keep you with the breath. In other words, if you find yourself listening to the talk, that’s a sign you’ve wandered away from the breath. So turn back and look at the breath again. Try to notice where you feel the breath. This process of feeling the breath, that energy that brings the air into the lungs and then allows it to go back out, where are the limits of that breath, that set of sensations? If you pursue them, you find that you run into subtler sensations in other parts of the body that you might not normally think of being as associated with the breath. But from the Buddhist point of view, the breath is associated with what he calls the wind property in the body, and that goes through all the limbs of the body. As John Lee says, it goes through your bloodstreams, it goes through your nerves, out to the pores of your skin. So ultimately, as you get in touch with the breath, you’re going to be aware of the whole body, out to the level of the skin, all around. In the beginning, you work with the parts that you can observe. And the more consistently and steadily you can stay with them, the more you find that they begin to branch out. So in the beginning, yes, you try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture. Now, the word rapture here has a wide range of meanings. It’s a sensation of energy or fullness. The body feels nourished. The word for rapture in Pali, bhitti, is related to the word for drink. Think of all the cells in your body drinking in breath energy. Ask which ones are thirsty. Think of the breath energy going to nourish them. And then when they’re nourished, notice if there are other cells that don’t feel quite so nourished and keep on doing this throughout the body. This serves several purposes. One is it gives you energy. The sense of rapture is food for the mind. When things feel full, energized in the body, you’re a lot more content to stay right here. That’s when you’re feeling starved, uncomfortable. The mind is going to go someplace else. Look for anywhere else. At the same time, as you’re doing this, you realize that as you’re feeding this good breath energy to the different parts of the body, it’s good not only for the mind but also for the body itself. It helps the circulation get everywhere in the body. There’s a sense of nourishment, both for body and for mind. Then after that, the Buddha recommends that you breathe in a way that gives rise to ease. Sometimes the rapture itself may feel easeful and pleasant. Other times it starts feeling unpleasant when it gets too intense. I know some people who feel that when the rapture comes on they feel like they’re drowning. It gets very unpleasant. So if you find it unpleasant, think of tuning into a more refined sense of breath energy. That underlies the energy of the rapture. Then try to stay with that. Think of all the different parts of the body connecting together. You’re working eventually to a state of concentration where the breathing stops, and all too many people will try to force the breathing to stop in order to get there. And the breathing is not going to stop just by your trying to suppress it. It stops when you don’t need to breathe. So think about what would be required for you not to need to breathe. It would mean keeping the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in your blood just right so that it doesn’t bring the part of the brain that says, “Oops, now you need to breathe in.” So there are two ways to keep that part of the brain from being triggered. One is to get your mind very, very, very still. The brain is the main consumer of oxygen and producer of carbon dioxide in the body. So just think of all the energy in the head gathering together in a nice, snug way. Not putting too much pressure on it, but everything seems to fall into place. Think of the energy in the head being very centered and still. That’s one way. The other way is to connect all the breath channels in the body. There is some oxygen exchange going on at the skin. So if you need oxygen to come in and carbon dioxide to go out, just think of everything opening up and getting all connected. So if one part of the body feels starved of breath energy, it can be fed by another part, which in turn is getting its breath straight from the skin. So the more things are connected up inside, the less you’re going to feel a need to breathe in and breathe out. So again, you’re not trying to stifle or suppress the breath. You’re simply creating the conditions where the body doesn’t feel a need to breathe. That way the concentration doesn’t place undue tension on the body or on the processes of the body. So the body feels nourished, feels healthy, just sitting here very, very, very still. So you’re working with two things here. You’re working with feeling and you’re working with perception. The Buddha calls these mental fabrications. These are the two of the aggregates that have the most direct impact on the state of your being. With the feeling, you’re trying to get things very refined. With the perception, you’re trying to hold in mind a picture of the breath, a picture of how the energy works in the body that’s conducive to calming things down, both physically and mentally. You can hold in mind that sense of fullness, the sense of refreshment, nourishment. And let it dissolve away any patterns of tension you may feel, any patterns of blockage you may feel in the body. You’re using perception together with feeling to calm things down. What we’ve been doing here is working through what are called the four steps of the second tetrad in the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. There are four tetrads in all. The first three will pretty much cover the same territory from different perspectives. You can either look at things directly from the breath. That’s the first tetrad. In the second tetrad, you look at the breath through the perspective of feeling and perception. You use feelings and perceptions to calm down the mind. At the same time, you’re going to be calming down the breath. The third tetrad deals directly with the mind. You’re being sensitive to the state of the mind, trying to gladden it when it needs to be gladdened, steady it when it needs to be steadied, and release it from any sense of oppression when it needs to be released. We can do that by working with the feeling and perception. These are the aggregates you’re going to be working with most directly as you try to get things to settle down, both in body and in mind. So notice the feelings that come from the breath. Notice the feelings that come from the way you focus and figure out how to create skillful feelings—feelings that’ll have a good impact on the mind. All too often we’re told, “Just be with whatever comes up,” but that leaves you defenseless. It leaves you without the strengthening you need. Then the resources that are right here are free for your taking. And you’ll notice also that because we’re working with fabrication here—the fabrication of feeling and perception—it’s giving us some insight into cause and effect right here, right now. How you can bring the mind to stillness without clamping down on it. How you can bring the breath to stillness without clamping down on it. You learn from having hands-on experience with these two types of fabrication. This is why the Buddha recommended breath meditation, because it’s a way of calming the mind at the same time that you develop a sensitivity to cause and effect. As he said, the steps of breath meditation can take you all the way to clear knowing and release, in other words, to the ultimate goal. This is how you do it. You get really sensitive. You find the breath and get more and more sensitive to the breath. Notice the feelings and perceptions that surround the breath. Get sensitive to those and use them to calm things down. So you notice wherever there’s any sense of disturbance. You’re going to ask yourself, “Okay, what’s causing the disturbance?” When we’re told to look for inconstancy or anicca, what you want to see is when the level of disturbance goes up and when it goes down. When it goes up, what did you just do? When it goes down, what did you just do? That teaches you what you’ve got to let go of. Any thoughts that come in, just stop thinking them. Anything that’s causing a rise in the level of disturbance, just stop doing it. This is how you ferret things out inside. So it all starts from this simple process of getting really sensitive to the breath energy in the body and trying to develop a sense of skill around it. All too often, our idea of gaining knowledge of something is that you read about things or you think about things, but the Buddha’s made an effort to teach us the analogies of skill—the skills of a cook, the skills of an archer, the skills of a carpenter, the skills of an acrobat. In other words, the knowledge you gain from acting and trying to do things well. After all, his word for the ignorance that underlies suffering is avijja, which is the opposite of vijja, which also means, in addition to knowledge, skillful knowledge, the skills of a doctor. The doctor is vijja. This is the kind of knowledge you gain by trying to do things skillfully. So try to be as sensitive as possible to what you’re doing around the breath right now, because it’s in learning to develop that skill and to learn how to observe that skill. That’s where things are going to open up. That’s the kind of knowledge that will allow things to open up in the mind.

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