A Sense of Just Right

September 19, 2012

First, get your body in place. Sit with your back comfortably straight, face forward. Close your eyes. Place your hands on your lap, the right hand on top of the left. And there you are, the body’s in place. The next step is to get the mind in place. And again, it’s not all that hard. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. We call this breath meditation, but it’s really more breathing meditation, in the sense that you’re focusing on the sensation of the breathing process in the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Where is there movement? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? Allow your attention. Listen to settled air. Stay with the breath as it comes in, as it goes out. That’s getting the mind in place. That’s the easy part of the meditation. The hard part is getting it to stay in place. Part of the problem is the body. If you’re not used to the posture, it takes a while to get used to. You find that the blood is cut off from your legs, maybe. Or some part of your back. So when you breathe in, think of the breath, again, as an energy that flows through the body. And it can flow anywhere in the body at all. As you get more used to focusing on the breathing sensations in the body, you see that they’re all through the torso, down the back. You can actually feel them in the legs and the arms, in your head. It’s hard to notice if they flow smoothly. Think of relaxing the muscles of your back, say. Many times, if there’s a problem with the flow of the blood in the legs, it’s because there’s tension in the back. Just go down the spine as you feel the middle of the back. If you notice any tension pulling a vertebrae to the right or the left, try to relax it. Straighten things out. Open things up. Go all the way down the spine and then out the legs. That helps to minimize any chance of your legs going asleep. And at the same time, it gives you something to do with the breath energy in the present moment. If the breathing is just in-out, in-out, nothing else, it gets very boring very quickly. But when you realize that the movement of the breath energy with the body can have a big impact on the body, and it has a big impact on the mind, when you realize that, it gives you something to explore, something to get interested in. How do you breathe in a way that feels just right? If the mind feels tired, how do you breathe in a way that gives it more energy? If you feel tense, how do you breathe in a way that’s more relaxing? These are things you can explore. You can try longer breathing or shorter breathing. Deeper, more shallow. Heavier, lighter. Faster, slower. Have a sense of playing with the breath. Because as with any skill, if you learn to enjoy it, that’s half the battle right there. Try breathing down the back, breathing down the front of the torso, breathing through the legs, the arms, breathing through the different parts of your head. Try to develop a sense of just right in the body. The breath is coming in, the breath is going out. There are parts of the body that may feel tense, and there are other parts that will be perfectly okay. Focus on the okay parts. Try to notice which parts of the body have a sense of ease. It may not be overwhelming, but it’s okay. And allow those okay parts to stay okay all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Sometimes you find a tendency that when you’re focusing on the breath you try to emphasize the end of the in-breath or emphasize the end of the out-breath by kind of pinching it off a little bit. That doesn’t help. You don’t want to pinch anything off. You don’t want to squeeze anything or pump anything in. You’re just allowing the breath energy to flow in, flow out. Without trying to box it in. If you want, you can start with the hands and think of relaxing the fingers up through the palms, up through the wrists. Or you can start with the feet, the toes, the parts of the foot, the ankles. When they feel relaxed, just allow them to stay relaxed. And see if you can breathe in, breathe out in a way that doesn’t bring any tension. And if you can maintain that sense of relaxed, open energy, it’ll begin to spread. So you’re trying to maintain that sense of just right. You’re sitting here right in the middle of this just rightness. You’re maintaining your balance. In that chant we had just now about the factors of the eightfold path, there’s the word samma, or right, for each of the factors. My teacher, Jon Fung, liked to interpret it as meaning just right. Your concentration is just right, not too strong, not too weak. Your mindfulness, your views, everything is just right, balanced. That was one meaning he gave to the word. The other meaning was something that you could maintain balanced for a long time. It’s trying to maintain a sense of balance that makes the meditation really pleasant. Of course, at first it’s like riding a bicycle. You’re trying to maintain your balance, and you fall over to the right, you fall over to the left. It takes a while to get that sense of balance. And, of course, nobody can teach it to you. You have to gain your own inner sense of what feels right. What kind of breathing feels too short, too long, too deep, too shallow? What amount of pressure of your focus feels too much, too little? But as you work at it and you observe again and again and again, you’ll finally get a sense of, “Okay, this is just right,” and then you try to maintain it. Of course, you can’t maintain it by getting tense around it. Have a fluid sense of just right, a fluid sense of your balance. Try to maintain it as long as you can. And the mind will say, “Well, what next?” And you’ll say, “This is it. Learning how to maintain the balance teaches you a lot of things about the mind.” You’ll find other thoughts coming in to knock you off balance, and you have to learn how to not get knocked by them, how to let them go past without your standing in the way. Outside noises make knock you off balance. We’ve got to learn how to just let them go right through. And as you maintain your balance, you learn a lot about the mind. The things that knock it over, the things that don’t, and what you can do to not get knocked over. We tend to think of insight as being something very exalted, but it starts with these little things. So learning how to read your meditation, get a sense of just right, and how to maintain that sense of just right in all sorts of situations. The insights do go a lot deeper than that, but this is how you begin your work with insight. With discernment. It also teaches you patience. Another teaching from Ajahn Phuong is that nobody got into nirvana through just force of desire. You have to learn how to balance things just right, bring everything to equilibrium. After all, this is the middle path. And as you maintain that sense of just rightness, it will develop on its own. All too often we try to squeeze things in the direction we want them to go. It’s like squeezing the avocados to make them ripe faster. It doesn’t work that way. You water the roots of the trees, make sure they’ve got fertilizer, make sure they don’t have any pests, and the avocados will ripen on their own. It’s the same with your concentration. You look after the breath, you look after the sense of just right in the breath, and your concentration will develop strength. In other words, you look after the causes and the results take care of themselves. So try to develop this sense of just right and see how continuous you can make it. Because it’s right there that all the path comes together.

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