Get Out of Your Head

January 4, 2013

There’s a lot going on in your head. You’ve got to get out of your head. One way to do that is to focus your attention on your hands and your feet as far away from your head as possible. Think of the middle of the palms, the hands, the middle of the soles of the feet. Just notice what kind of sensation you have there. Watch that sensation as you breathe in, watch it as the breath goes out, and tell yourself you’re not going to move. You’re just going to stay right there. Whatever else comes by, you’re not going to let yourself get blown away. Concentration needs a place to stand. The word for the object of the concentration is aramana. It literally means “support.” It’s something you stand on, something you hold on to. When your concentration needs energy, this is what you’ve got to do. Just hold on to that one spot. Don’t give yourself too many other things to do. This is where using a meditation work can also be helpful. Use the meditation work just to jam the circuits. Butto, butto, butto. If your breath is too slow and it seems like there’s a lot of space between the buttos, you can cut the butto free from the breath and just repeat that in any rhythm you want. That’s basically it. There’s not a lot to explain. Just do it, do it, do it again and again and again. Whatever thoughts are going through the mind, you don’t have to pay them any attention at all. You’re done in the hand. Once you’re done in the feet, the single-mindedness can give a lot of strength to your concentration. If you find that you’ve been working hard, the mind is in no mood to do any analysis, or if you start analyzing things, it just gets blown away. This is what you’ve got to do. Just nail your awareness down to those spots in the body. And then do everything you can to keep your awareness there. You don’t have to ask yourself how long you’re going to be staying there or how long you expect that you can stay there. Don’t let your expectations get in the way. Stay there as long as you need, as long as you find it does give some energy to your concentration. And if part of the mind says, “This is stupid,” say, “Okay, I’m going to be stupid for this hour.” Whatever it complains, you don’t have to listen to its complaints. Your main interest right now is to energize your concentration. And John Lee has a passage where he says if you’re trying to analyze the breath in different parts of the body, and you find that that just makes it easier for your mind to slip off outside of the body, then you’ve got to narrow your attention down to just one spot. Like a person planting a new orchard. If you’re trying to fill the whole orchard with the trees, you use up all your mind, and it turns out there’s a dry spell. That’s it. The trees all die and you have nothing to show for your money. So what you do is you just plant one corner of the orchard, and you tend to that really well, however much you can handle. As for the rest of the orchard, that can wait. If your mind goes wandering off thinking about how much you want the whole orchard to be you say, “This is not the time for that yet. This is the time to stay right here.” Focus on what you’ve got, what you can handle. One of the ways of exercising discernment and wisdom in your practice is when you realize that you don’t have the energy that you would like to have, so you’ve got to focus on a smaller area. That’s how you build up your energy. In the same way, when you plant the orchard, the trees that you plant will give seeds in their fruit, and then you can plant those seeds. You don’t have to buy any more seeds. The seeds come free with the new trees. So from that you expand and expand and expand. In other words, when the act of focusing on your hands and feet begins to give rise to more energy, then you can expand the range of your awareness a little bit to the whole hands and the whole feet, and start moving up the arms, moving up the legs. But there’s no need to be in a great hurry. Focus on the area that you can handle and that you find is energizing. Then as for what else is going on in your head, just leave it alone. That’s not your territory right now. We in the West live so much in our heads that it’s good to get out and learn to step back from what’s going on in your head. This is one of the most essential skills in the meditation, learning how to separate yourself from your thought worlds. The first step in doing that is to have something physical you can focus on that’s not influenced by the thought worlds. Sometimes the breath is a little bit too close to the head and gets sucked into your thoughts about the past and the future. So get out of that area, down to the heart. Down to the hands, down to the feet. Allow those areas to relax so that they feel comfortable, they feel spacious. But your attention is right there. It’s not going anywhere else. If you want to think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body right there at the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, that’s fine. But try to keep your focus consistent. Stay right here, right here, right here. It’s like that image of the small flame. You’ve got a windy day. You want to start a fire. You have to protect whatever little flame you can get going. Eventually it will grow to consume all of your energy. Before you can get it there, you’ve got a little tiny, tiny flame, and you’ve got to protect it. And you can’t be concerned, “Well, when is the flame going to grow?” You just stay with it, stay with it, stay with it. And the fact that you’re staying with it, that’s the power of the concentration. And don’t worry about how long it’s going to take for it to catch. Or how long it’s going to take for it to grow. Just keep looking after what you’ve got. And when the conditions are right, then everything will ignite.

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