Just This Small Spot

January 16, 2013

Get your body into position to meditate, and your mind. For the body, it means sitting up straight. Pull your shoulders back a little bit. Keep your back straight. Try to be conscious that when you breathe out, you’re not going to hunch over. That happens all too often. Face straight ahead. Close your eyes. Keep your head in your lap. And there you are. Your body’s in position. Then try to get your mind in position. It’s one of the reasons we have the chance before the meditation to develop the right attitude. Notice the chance tends to focus on two things. On the one hand, there’s stress, pain, suffering. The chat we had just now on how all your senses are aflame with aging, illness, and death. Passion, aversion, delusion. And on the other hand, there’s that wish, “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy. May you all forever be well.” It’s quite a contrast, but that’s why we’re meditating. Because the only way out of the sufferings of life is to train the mind. That’s why we’re here. And it’s good to remind yourself of that on a regular basis. So when the mind is tempted to wander away from the breath or whatever its meditation object is going to be, it runs into that wall. You’re going to ask yourself, “Why are you looking for trouble?” You’ve looked for happiness in things that you can see and feel. You’ve looked for pleasure in things that you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, for who knows how long. And you’ve found pleasures, but you’ve also seen those pleasures go. And if that were all there was to life, then that’s where you’d have to look for your happiness. But there’s more. There are the qualities of the mind that can take you to a happiness that doesn’t go. That’s what we’re training the minds for. So keep that in mind. As one of the fences you’re going to place around the mind as you meditate. Because you want to focus the mind on one thing. Let’s take the breath as an object. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. Place your attention there. And place it in such a way that you’re not putting too much of a squeeze or pressure on the breath. Allow the breath to flow smoothly and freely in a way that feels good, that feels nourishing for the body, calming if you’re feeling tense or nervous, relaxing if you’re feeling stressed out, energizing if you’re feeling tired. Learn how to exert some intelligent control over the way you are settling into the present moment. Because all too often, exerting control turns into becoming a control freak, which you don’t want. Control freaks want certain results, but they don’t know how to do it. So they just push, push, push, and create a lot more disturbance than they do peace and calm. But you’re not just sitting here letting things take their own course. You are trying to notice what are the causes of getting the mind to settle down, what are the causes of having it leave, and how can you encourage the first set of causes and discourage the second one. Those are some things to keep in mind as you focus on the breath, as you get the mind in a position here. The difficult part, of course, is staying in position, both with the body and with the mind. A good way to help with both of those, keeping both of those in position, is to allow the breath energy to flow throughout the body. Notice where the energy flow in the body feels pinched. That’s going to cause trouble down the line, both for the body and for the mind. Years back, when I was first meditating, I noticed that within fifteen minutes my legs would go asleep. And the only way to prevent that from happening was to work on spreading the energy as quickly as possible. So once the breath feels okay, you don’t have to make it rapturous or anything. Just make it okay. Let it be okay. And think of that okay energy going throughout the body. You don’t have to squeeze it or push it through the body. All you have to do is think it can go. As soon as the breath starts coming in, there’s one layer of energy that has already flowed all the way throughout the body. So keep that sense of easy, natural flow in mind and run your attention down the back of the head. Notice if there’s any spot along the backbone where you feel a tightness or constriction. And see if you can consciously relax it. Then keep it relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then survey the area in the pelvis. And down through the legs, all the way out to the feet. Think of the energy flowing not only down to the toes, but out through the toes into the air to create this sense of openness all the way down. Keep that perception in mind of open, easy-flowing breath. If you drop it or forget it, then try to pick it up again. Because it really does help you stay here in position. We want to develop this sense of the mind as being at home here, feeling at ease and secure in the present moment. And because you want it to watch what’s happening right here in itself. But first you watch the breath, because the breath is a good mirror for the mind. It gives you something to focus on. It helps also get you out of your head for a while, out of all your thoughts. You’re here with a physical sensation, a pleasant sensation, a sensation that expands and works through a lot of the patterns of tension in the different parts of the body. So you don’t get blown around so easily by what’s happening in the mind. If you’re with that sense of the whole body, then a thought can come into the mind, but you don’t have to grab hold of it. You can just watch it come. You don’t have to pay too much attention to it. You notice that it’s there. But again, you don’t have to get engaged with it. It’s like someone coming up to talk to you while you’re engaged in a job. You know the person is there, but you don’t want to talk to the person because you’ve got to pay attention to what you’re doing. After a while, the person goes away. In other words, while you’re concentrating on the breath, it doesn’t mean that’s the only thing that you’re going to be aware of, but it’s the only thing that you give your attention to. And you’ll have to learn how to discount anything else that’s coming up. This is your basic stance as a meditator. You want this stance to be firm because you’re going to have to deal with a lot of difficult issues as you start working through the mind and as you carry this trained mind out into the world. So try to develop this stance so that it’s solid. Because whatever comes up, it’s going to come up right here. So if you’re solidly right here, you’re not so easily pushed around. And John Chah has a nice image of having one chair in your room. And other people can come and visit, but you don’t let them move into the chair, because if they do, they’ll squeeze you out. Then you won’t have any place to sit. But if you’re the one who’s sitting in the chair, then they come in. They can stand around, but they can’t see that there’s any place to sit down properly, so they’ll leave. And even if they don’t leave, at least you have your comfortable chair. That makes life a lot easier. Because you have enough right here for your own well-being, for your own happiness. For your own sense of ease. Years back, there was a time when I was the only person in the monastery in Thailand, and we had a lot of electric tools. And there was always the concern that someone might try to sneak in and steal them. So I had to sleep in a place that was near the electric tools. And it turned out the only place that was really convenient was this old shed. Thailand had a lot of these little bugs that were kind of like potato bugs, only there were hundreds of thousands of them. They were just swarming all over the place. They wouldn’t sting or bite or anything, but they could crawl into your nose or your ear if you weren’t careful. So I set up my umbrella tent and meditated for a while and addressed them in my mind. And I said, “Look, you guys can have the whole rest of the building. All I ask for is this one little spot where my umbrella tent is.” And sure enough, none of them came into the little area of the tent there. If I had tried to clear all the bugs out of the whole building before I could sleep there, I never would have gotten any sleep. And it’s the same with a lot of the issues in life. You can’t wait for everything in your life to be easy or to go your way before you’re going to train the mind. In fact, you need to train the mind in order to deal with the things that are very difficult to deal with. But it’s good to learn that all you need is this one little space. It’s your sense of awareness in the body. There will come a time when you can’t even have the whole body. Pains will come in, diseases will come in, and your little space within the body will have to get smaller. But as long as you can take at least one part of the body and have a sense of belonging there, that helps you to take your stance in the present moment. And it’s not just an issue of space. It’s also an issue of time. Just the present moment. That’s all you need to worry about right now. You don’t have to worry about the next breath or the last breath. You’re right here with this breath, this breath, this breath. The same goes with any pains that come up. Don’t think about how long they’ve been there or how much longer they’re going to be there. You’re here, right here. The pain is there. You don’t have to lay claim to it. You don’t have to carry the entire history of the pain. Just this one small spot. So try to settle in here. If you’re going to lay claim to anything, lay claim to this one small spot. Don’t let yourself get pushed out or pushed away. And as for everything else right now, you can let it go. The mind needs a spot like this. This is where it can do a lot of healing work. Life brings a lot of aging, illness, death, separation—all kinds of things that can damage the mind. If we go out and lay claim to them, we have to learn how to let go of the things that can age and grow ill and die, things that you can be separated from. At least for the time being. Give the mind a chance to heal. And this one small spot here in the present moment is best for healing. It’s big enough to do the healing, if you allow yourself to settle in.

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