A Place to Step Back

February 23, 2013

Your body’s right here. The task for the hour is to make sure your mind stays right here. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breath. Because breath here is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s the feeling of energy that flows in the body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. That sense of energy flow that you want to work with. Because one of the tricks to staying here is learning how to breathe in a way that feels really good, that’s enticing, makes you want to stay here. So notice where you feel the breath and notice if that breath feels good at that spot or in those spots. If it doesn’t, what could you change? Could you make the breath longer, shorter, deeper? More shallow? Heavier? Lighter? Experiment for a while with your breathing. It’s one of the few bodily processes that you have some control over to see what you can do to make the body in the present moment a more comfortable and interesting place to stay. Or one of the things that makes it more interesting is if you have any pains or illnesses. Say you’ve got a cold right now. It may be hard to breathe through your nose. Well, where do you feel the breath energy flowing otherwise? There are certain levels of breath energy that can come in and out of the body anywhere, through the back of the neck, in the middle of the chest. There’s no air coming in and out there, but there is a flow of energy that feels like something’s coming in. So you can focus there instead. Or if you have a pain in your knee, think of the breath energy flowing down the leg and down through the pain and out the tips of your toes. Allow yourself to think of energy in the body in this way, to see how it helps in getting the mind to settle down and to feel good about settling down. Once there’s a sense of ease, you may want to let that sense of ease spread through the different parts of the body. If you find yourself wandering away from the breath, well, just come right back. Whatever the thought was, you don’t have to tie up the loose ends before you drop it. Just let it float away in a fragment. One of the nice things about the breath, it’s always there. Each time you come back to the breath, try to breathe in a way that feels especially good to reward the suffering of coming back. All too often people mess themselves up in the meditation by getting angry with themselves by the fact that the mind isn’t staying. And that doesn’t help anything at all. If you reward the suffering of coming back, the mind will be more and more inclined to want to come back. And see if you can catch yourself in the act of moving away. And again, just drop whatever the thought was, half-formed, and come back to the breath. Even better, if you can sense when the mind is about to go, like it’s at the edge of a leaf, like an inchworm, just waving around the other end of the inchworm to see if another leaf will come by. If you sense that happening, just bring the other end of the inchworm back onto the original leaf. You don’t have to go anywhere, you can stay right here. And again, breathe in a way that feels really good. You’re learning some skills in how to keep the mind interested in staying here. Because if it’s just in, out, in, out, in, out, the mind is going to get bored and it’s going to find something else to entertain it. But if you realize you’re dealing with the energy in the body, the energy in the body is bound to have an effect on the health of the body, the extent to which the blood flows to the different parts of the body, the different organs. Which part of your torso is not getting breath energy right now? The spleen, liver, kidneys, intestines? Breathe in a way that all the parts of the body feel that they’re nourished by energy. This way, both the mind and the body benefit. And you’re adding to your repertoire of skills. Learning how to focus the mind and getting the mind to do what you want it to do. This is really important, because our minds can create a lot of problems simply because they don’t stay still, or they don’t do what you want them to do. You want it to work and it doesn’t work, it goes and thinks about something else. You want it to relax and it won’t relax, it starts thinking about work. So you want to train the mind. And sometimes you train the mind by being stern with it, and other times you train it by being really nice. Working with the breath is a way of being really nice. Giving yourself something interesting and pleasurable to do in the present moment. You’re both working with the breath and playing with the breath. Working in the sense that you’re using the breath to do something with a serious purpose, getting the mind to settle down. Playing in the sense that you can think of the breath energy going anywhere in the body, in any direction. You’ll find that some ways of picturing the breath energy to yourself are actually counterproductive. They can actually lead to pain. That’s when part of the body builds up a lot of pressure, usually the head. If you find that happening, just reverse the directions. If you catch yourself as you breathe in thinking of the energy going up, up, up into the head, thinking of a headache, thinking of it going down, down, down out to the soles of your feet, the palms of your hands. Take some time to get acquainted with how the body feels right here. In the old texts, they talk about the four elements, the four properties of the body. And when we first read about it, it sounds like a very primitive type of chemistry. But that’s not what they’re talking about. They’re talking about how you feel the body sitting right here. How do you know there’s a body? There’s a sense of solidity. And then there’s a sense of movement. There’s heat and there’s coolness. Those are the properties that you’re exploring right here, right now. So if you’re feeling too warm, think of where in the body there are the cool parts. Focus your attention there. And vice versa, if you’re feeling too hot, too warm in here. And as for the movement, if there’s too much movement, you get lightheaded. If there’s not enough movement, you feel sluggish. So how do you balance those two properties out? You find that simply thinking about them can have an important impact. And where you focus your attention can have an important impact as well. The body right here should be familiar territory, but for many of us it’s like one of those old maps from the 16th century with the coastlines of all the continents filled in with detail but huge blank spaces in the middle where it’s written, “Here be tigers.” So take some time to explore. Because that’s what the meditation is. It’s developing skills and also exploring. So you can expand the range of your skills. The whole premise of the meditation, the whole purpose of the meditation, is that the mind causes itself a lot of unnecessary suffering. And you can choose not to suffer, but it’s not simply a matter of saying, “Okay, I’m not going to suffer anymore,” and that’s that. It’s like self-esteem. You can’t simply tell yourself, “Well, I have a lot of self-esteem,” and hope that you’re going to solve the problems of low self-esteem. You actually have to develop skills on which you can generally base an honest sense of self-esteem. And the same with dealing with the problem of the suffering that the mind causes for itself. Unnecessary stress it causes for itself. You have to learn new skills in how you relate to the body and how you relate to the different identities the mind takes on. Because it’s in developing new skills, mastering new skills, that you get some useful identities. There’s an interesting book called The Craftsman which talks about how people with manual skills tend to have much better balanced personalities, and they’re better members of society. Why? Because it takes a certain amount of maturity to work at a skill, to take the time and the interest. First to learn the rudiments of the skill from someone else, and then to learn how to observe your own actions and pass judgment on your own actions with a fair and balanced mind. Not with the purpose of passing final judgment as to how good you are at the skill, whether you’re a good carpenter or a good cook, but with the purpose of doing it better the next time. That way of judging yourself is really useful. And so right now you can work on how you’re dealing with the breath, to what extent you’re staying with the breath, to what extent the breath is interesting, to what extent it’s not interesting. Then you can ask yourself, “What ingenuity can you bring to this to make it more interesting so you can stay here more and more consistently?” Because this ability to settle down and be clearly in the present moment, right here with the body, gives you an important platform from which you can observe your mind, see the way it moves toward things or away from things. See the way it conflicts with itself over things. It gives you a place where you can step back and watch. This ability to step back is really, really important as you find yourself caught in a particular role. This can be in dealing with other people or just the way you deal with yourself. You see that this is causing a lot of stress. This is actually causing harm. You want an alternative place to stand. And this is what the breath gives you, an alternative place to step back so you can watch and drop the unskillful parts of that role. By expanding your range of skills, you allow yourself to pull out of a lot of old, unskillful habits. You give yourself a few new identities that you can take on that are more useful, more productive. And so in this way you’re taking this habit of the mind to take on different identities, which can often cause a lot of trouble as the identities conflict with one another. You’re actually taking this habit and learning to put it to good use. Because if you had only one identity, and there was something wrong with it, there was nothing you could do about it. You’d have to work on finding somebody to help you out. But the fact that you have many different identities allows the different identities in the mind to observe one another. And by adding a few more skillful identities into the mix, you change the balance of power inside. So you have a good place to step back and look at things right here, right now, wherever you are right here, right now. And the steadier you can make your positioning of the mind right here, the more reliable the judgments it’s going to pass. And the greater its ability to deal with situations using your ingenuity for your own true well-being and the well-being of others. So take this opportunity, this hour here, as an opportunity to expand your inner skills. So you can greet situations, you can deal with your problems with a lot more flexibility and with more finesse.

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