Rotten Birds

April 4, 2013

Learn how to be a connoisseur of your breath, the way you’d be a connoisseur of fine coffee. Try to notice where it feels really good, where it doesn’t feel so good, and what you can do to make improvements. The more sensitive you are to the breathing, the more likely the mind is going to be willing to settle down. Find a sense that it’s nourishing, satisfying. Parts of the body that used to be starved to breath energy are now finally getting some nourishment that can pull you into the present moment. It’s important that you learn how to feed the mind in this way, because if it doesn’t feed on good things, it’s going to go out and feed on all kinds of old garbage. We talked about it this afternoon, old resentments, old griefs that come up. Sometimes when the mind is quiet, these things just come bubbling up, and you find yourself going right for them. So there are two things you have to do. One is to remind yourself that the breath is a lot more nourishing, because the pleasure that comes from the breath is not just simply a physical pleasure. The nourishment that comes from staying with the breath is not just a physical pleasure. You’re developing good qualities of mind. You’re developing strengths of mind as you stay here. Strength of mindfulness, alertness, discernment, concentration. All of these things build up the strength within the mind that enables you to put up with all kinds of things. Pains and problems that used to overwhelm you don’t overwhelm you anymore. Places where you used to thirst for this kind of pleasure or that kind of satisfaction, you find you’re not so thirsty or hungry anymore. You’ve got something better. And the mind is in a position where it can actually fix good food out of whatever comes its way when it has those strengths. So staying with the breath is not just a place to hide out and be comfortable for a while. You’re developing good qualities of mind that you can apply to all kinds of other areas of life. So that’s one thing, to learn how to appreciate the strength and nourishment that comes from being with the breath right here. The other thing is to turn around and look at those other preoccupations that come up and ask yourself, “Why do you find them so alluring? What’s the appeal?” Many times, it’s not just a matter of understanding. Because when there’s an old injustice or an old resentment, that’s where your sense of self is really, really strong. And it’s the kind of self that we have trouble letting go of. After a while, we were wronged in one way or another, even with a grief. Even with separation, aging, illness, whatever, the grief is around. These things happen to everybody. There’s always a way of telling ourselves a story that somebody somehow dumped on us by the universe. So you have to ask yourself, “What’s the appeal there? Why do you like this?” And you have to be willing to look at the fact that your mind has some bad habits. This is something we don’t like to look at. We say, “Oh, this is horrible. How can I get out of this? What’s going on here?” Without being willing to admit that we’re complicit in bringing up the story and hanging onto it. It’s like some old dead bird that a dog has buried. Then it digs it up someday, rolls around in it for a while, and then buries it again. You wonder what kind of pleasure the dog could find in such a smelly thing like that. But it does. You have to realize your mind finds pleasure in smelly things sometimes. And look at it until you realize that it’s not really worth it. But you have to look very carefully to see what the appeal is, what the allure is, and admit it to yourself. That’s when you can begin to actually look at the drawbacks and start making comparisons. Otherwise, if you deny the allure and yet go sneaking out for it anyhow, part of the mind is hiding something from itself. And that’s not how discernment arises. You have to be very frank with yourself. This is why you like that kind of thinking. This is the little tiny sliver of pleasure you get out of it. And then you can compare it. Which would be better? The pleasure and the strength that comes from the meditation? Or this old rotten bird? This doesn’t mean that you lose your taste for the old rotten bird immediately. There’s a story they tell of a retreat one time they were doing for some inner-city kids. They took them to a retreat center out in the countryside and fed them sprouts and all kinds of health food. Of course, the kids revolted, left the retreat center found in McDonald’s, got some cheeseburgers. So it’s not the case that just because you see this once that you’ll be able to overcome your old taste for things that are really not all that healthy for you. But the fact that you do have something better, and the more deeply you get into the breath, the more deeply you learn how to appreciate the nourishment that comes from getting the mind to settle down and be really alert and protected all around. The appeal of the concentration will get stronger and stronger, and you’ll find yourself less likely to slip off. Or if you do slip off, you’ll find it easier to come back. So you look for the appeal, you look for the drawbacks, you look for how these things come. What was it that sparked it? And then when you notice that it suddenly loses its appeal, what was it? What changed your mind? Because even though these things may seem pretty tenacious, they come and they go. Something will spark the memory, and there it is. It will hold its appeal for a while, and then it loses its appeal. Try to notice that. As the Buddha said, the moment when a particular craving or clinging ends, that’s something to witness. Be careful to see, to notice, why is it that suddenly it lost its appeal? That’ll give you a lot of insight into your mind, and help you to appreciate the fact that the health food really is good for you, and you find that you really do prefer it. And your heart and your head can get together on this.

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