Doing, Maintaining, Using

May 5, 2013

Okay, settled into a comfortable position. Keep your back comfortably straight. Face forward, close your eyes, and place your hands on your lap. We’ve had the chant for goodwill, so the next step is to focus on your breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel it. Where it seems most prominent might be at the nose, with the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen, any place in the body where there are clear sensations that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Focus in on the spot where the breath is clearest. Try to get very sensitive to noticing, when you’re breathing out, how long does it feel comfortable to breathe out and when is it no longer any comfortable to breathe out? Similarly, when you breathe in, at what point does it seem not so comfortable to breathe in anymore? Listen to that. Allow the sense of comfort in the breath to be in control. As for any thoughts that come through the mind, just let them pass right through. You don’t have to fight them. You don’t have to get involved with them. And if they pull you away from the breath, just drop them and you’ll find yourself right back at the breath. Let them do the pulling. You don’t have to do any pulling. If you notice that they’re pulling you, you just drop them. They can pull away, but you don’t go with them. And then just try to keep this up. The basic exercise is not all that difficult. The difficulty is in maintaining your concentration right here with the breath. You need three qualities to do this. There is mindfulness, which, unlike the popular versions of mindfulness, when the Buddha talked about mindfulness, he meant keeping something in mind. In this case, you’re going to keep the breath in mind and keep all the various things you can do with the breath in mind. So when you meet up with a problem, you have something to draw on to remind yourself, “Okay, this is what you can do when the breath doesn’t feel comfortable. This is what you can do when the mind feels oppressed by staying in the present moment.” There are lots of things you learn, either from listening or reading, and also the things you learn from your own experience of trying to stay with the breath—what works and what doesn’t work for you. So those are the things you can keep in mind. Unfortunately, you don’t have to run through the whole list all the time, but just keep in mind the fact, “Okay, now I’m with the breath, and I’m going to stay with the breath. I want to stay with the breath.” And then you’d want to be alert. Is the mind actually with the breath? If you’ve found that it’s been following those thoughts, just let them go and you’ll be right back. While you’re with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels. Because as you get to know the breath more and more, you begin to realize that it’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s a whole energy flow in the body that pulls the breath in and lets the breath go out. And that energy flow can be felt anywhere where there’s a nerve or a blood vessel in the body. It’s part of the energy that keeps you aware of the fact that you’ve got a body sitting right here. And you can use that knowledge to help you stay. For one thing, you can get interested in how this breath energy flows. Where does it feel constricted? Where does it feel blocked? What can you do to open up the blockage? Usually there’s a tension in a muscle someplace that blocks the flow of the breath. When you can locate where that tension is and release it, you find that you can suddenly be more sensitive to parts of the body that used to be shut off. It’s important here that you’ve worked through the body. So that releasing the tension at one spot doesn’t just ram it into another blockage someplace else. One way to do this is to start with the tips of your fingers and think of relaxing all the muscles coming up through the hands and the arms, up to the shoulders, and then doing the same starting down at the toes, working up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, through the torso. Think of the nerves and the blood vessels as being breath energy channels. Allow them all to open up to the sense of ease. Then you realize that it’s interesting. This is your body. This is how you sense your body. And if the breath flows freely throughout the body, it’s going to be good for the health of the body. And at the same time, the mind is going to like staying here, partly because of the sense of comfort and partly because it’s interesting to get to know this aspect of the body and realize you’ve got some resources here that you may not have used before. So that you’re not carrying a lot of tension around. Or if you find yourself having picked up some tension from something, you can release it as quickly as possible. As for the thoughts that come through, try to be alert to when they’re pulling you away and dropping them. This is where a third quality comes through, and that’s called ardency. Which means you really try to do a good job. You try to do this as skillfully as you can. So you notice that you’ve wandered off. Come back to the breath. And don’t deal in a lot of recriminations. Don’t get angry at yourself for having gotten lost. Just pick up the breath and follow it. If you want, you can ask yourself, “What would be a really good breath to breathe right now as a way of rewarding yourself for having come back?” And when you notice you’ve wandered off again, try to come back as quickly as possible. Remind yourself you don’t have to tie up all the loose ends on your wandering thoughts. You don’t have to pursue them to see where they’re going to go before you let them go. You see, this is a thought. This is not what you want right now. Just drop it. Let the loose ends sort of wave in the air. You don’t have to worry about them. So these are the three qualities you need in order to maintain the concentration, mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. So you can keep with this all the time, even as you get up and leave the meditation posture. You realize the breath is still there. Everything you need in order to keep the mind centered is still there. It’s simply that you’ve got a few other things you’ve got to think about—where you’re going to go, what you’re going to do. But you begin to realize that a lot of the activities that you engage in in the course of the day don’t require all your attention, and that you’re better off having the sense of a center inside. Just choose any one spot where you most sense it for the breath and try to keep your attention there. Don’t think of it as one more thing you’ve got to balance as you go through the day. It’s the center from which you’re coming, in other words, all your other things that you balance in terms of your work, your family, whatever. You’re standing here, and you’re standing with a sense of well-being. If you notice any tightness in that spot, release it immediately. This allows you to go through the day with a lot less tension building up. Then you begin to realize that it’s not just a matter of maintaining the concentration. You learn some things about your mind. What did you notice? What are the things that pull it off? What are the things that pull it away? Why do you let them pull you away? If you’d look really carefully at that, you’d begin to see where the mind lies to itself. It says, “I’m going to stay here with the breath, and zup, there it’s gone.” How did it do that? You want to look into this. If you have a sense of the breath as a solid foundation, you begin to see these things more clearly. At the same time, you begin to realize that when there are moods that come into the mind, you can take them apart. You don’t have to identify with them. You can step back from them. Anger comes in, you don’t have to go with it. And if you don’t go with it, it tends to die out. And you can use the breath, actually, to change your mood. Because what are your moods made out of? Partly it’s from the way you breathe. Anger comes in, you breathe a certain way. Fear comes in, you breathe a certain way. The anger and the fear have hijacked your breath, which gives them a lot more power over the mind. So you reclaim the breath. In other words, when anger comes in, you try to release the tightness that you might feel, say, in the stomach or in the middle of the chest. The same with the fear. Think of the breath energy flowing there. And when the physical side of the anger gets a lot easier to take, you find yourself less inclined to want to get something out of your system. Because your system feels good. There’s nothing that you have to get out. That weakens the idea that the anger often puts in your mind that you’ve got to say something right now. You’re creating a new mood in the mind by the way you breathe and also by the questions you ask yourself about it. We tend to think that moods are these non-verbal things that come like big waves into the mind. But you find that if you really look at them, there are words that the mind is telling itself, there are things the mind is telling itself about the mood, which keep the mood going. There are perceptions you hold in mind, the kind of images the mind flashes to itself to send messages from one part of the brain to another. When anger comes in, what was the message that was flashed? What kind of lizard brain idea was going through your brain? How about changing the perception? If you feel victimized by something, you can ask yourself, “Am I really victimized, or is that just something I’m carrying around?” If you feel weak and threatened, ask yourself, “Is that true?” On the contrary, if you feel like you’re in a position where you can pass judgment on other people and be harsh in your judgments, ask yourself, “Is that really my position?” The Buddha often says when you’re angry at somebody, you should remind yourself you’re like someone who’s going through a desert. You’re hot, thirsty, trembling thirst. You come across a little bit of water and a cow’s footprint. You realize that you need that water. But if you scoop it up with your hand, you’re going to dirty the water. So what do you do? You get down very carefully and you slurp it up. Now, that position you’re in is not one that you would like to have somebody take a picture of. But it’s an important image to remind yourself that you need to think about the goodness of other people. You can’t just let yourself decide that everybody in the world is selfish. Because if that’s the way they are, then you’re going to feel that you’re justified in acting that way as well. If you realize that the person you’re angry at does have some good qualities, has been good to you, or has said good things to you in the past, or at least thinks good things about you, then you need that to reflect on that goodness as much as you need the water and the footprint. Because that nourishes your own goodness. It makes you less likely to do harmful things. If the other person has no goodness at all, then you kind of feel sorry for them because they’re creating a really bad load of karma for themselves. So the Buddha says these things to remind us that you can change your perception of the situation. So you’ve got the breath, you’ve got the way you talk to yourself about things, you’ve got the feelings that come from the breath, you’ve got the perceptions. When you begin to see these things in action, you begin to realize that you’re not just watching a TV show. It’s more like an interactive computer game. If you don’t like the way things are put together, in terms of the way you breathe, the way you think, the perceptions you hold, the feelings you have, you can change them. And it’s not unnatural to do this. After all, your original moods are the result of having fabricated things in a habitual way. But just because it’s habit doesn’t mean that you’ve got to follow the old habits. In fact, one of the main lessons of the meditation is that we’re changing our habits here. And it’s by seeing things in this way that we’ve got the tools where we can change our habits, where we can change our emotions and moods. We don’t have to be oppressed by them. We don’t have to be a slave to them. We don’t have to believe them all the time. These are some of the ways that you can use your meditation. In fact, this is why we do it. It’s because the meditation is useful. It’s not just a place where you can rest, although that is one of its uses. The mind’s been working all day. You give it a place to rest. But then you don’t drop the concentration when you get up and go home. You try to carry it with you as much as you can. And you begin to realize you observe yourself more clearly this way. You observe what’s going on around you more clearly this way, because you’re coming from a still place. You can watch the movements of other things. And you also get a better sense of how you can manipulate the way you breathe and manipulate the way you think to create a better state of mind, a better basis for your actions in the world. So these are the three main steps of meditation. You learn how to do it, and then you learn how to maintain it. You learn how to put it to use. As you remember, there are lots of uses for this. These are just a few of them that I’ve mentioned here. That’s what gives you the motivation to keep it up. This is a training. It takes time. And with practice, you get more and more skilled at it, and you begin to realize that there are a lot of uses for this meditation that you might never have thought of. And it can have an influence on your life in all kinds of good ways. So keep these three stages in mind—the doing, the maintaining, and the using—because they strengthen one another. And they really do make a difference.

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