Running Commentary

June 8, 2013

At the beginning of each meditation, make a firm intention that you want to stay here with the breath. You may pose the question in the mind, “Does anybody object?” And you may find some voices in the mind that say, “No, I’d rather think about x,” or “I’d rather think about y.” So you may want to have a little discussion. This is why we have those chants at the beginning, to reflect on the one hand that we all want to be happy. And if we’re wishing that all beings be happy, then we have to make sure that our happiness doesn’t harm them. That means we have to start looking for happiness inside. This is why we meditate. We also want happiness that’s reliable. This is why we have those reflections on aging, illness, death, and separation. As you look for happiness simply in having a human body, looking after that, looking for happiness in relationships, you have to remember they’re all going to end. And what you’re left with is the results of your actions. Another good reason why you want to train the mind is because your actions come out of the mind. And if the mind isn’t trained, it’s going to do all kinds of crazy things as it tries to find happiness among things that keep slipping through your fingers, like water. So that’s why we’re here, realizing the mind needs to be trained. Any objections? You pose that question to yourself, and you find that there are a number of voices who will be quiet at the beginning, but they’ll await their opportunity. But it’s good to arm yourself at the beginning with these reflections and with the determination that you really do want to stay here because you see the importance of getting your mind trained. And then you settle down. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. And notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Because when we talk about the breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the feeling of energy that flows through the body. It allows the breath to come in, it allows the breath to go out. Notice where you feel that. It might be in the chest, it might be in the abdomen, it could be all kinds of places in the body. Because when you get really sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you realize that it travels through all your nerves and all your blood vessels, out to every pore of the skin. So at the very beginning, but at the very least, hold that possibility in mind. Pay attention to where you do feel the breathing. If you want to use a meditation word along with it, you can use the word bhutto, which means “awake.” That’s the adjective the Buddha used to describe himself. That’s why we call him the Buddha, the Awakened One. You want your mind to be awake, to be alert. And if you have trouble settling down, you want to stick with both the breath and the meditation word. If you begin to settle down, and you want to start observing the subtleties of the breath, then you drop the meditation word and just be with the feeling. You pick it up again only when you find the mind is wandering. And as you’re trying to settle down, it’s important to be aware of the other voices in the mind. The ones that finally say, “Well, I’d rather think about yesterday or think about tomorrow or think about what so-and-so did last week or what I would like to do next week.” You’ve got all this free time. You have to learn to recognize those voices as voices you don’t want to follow right now. This is where it’s really useful to think about the mind as being a committee. Lots of different voices, some that you’ve picked up from who knows where, others you can identify. This is the voice of your father. This is the voice of your mother. This is the voice of your friends. This is the voice of commercials on TV. And when you see them as voices, you realize you don’t have to identify with them. They’re good voices. They’re concerned about your well-being in a wise way. You can approach those voices and train them to see that staying with the breath is a really good place to stay. As the mind settles down, you develop mindfulness, the ability to keep things in mind, and alertness, the ability to notice things clearly as they’re happening. You’re developing ardency and the desire to do something well. All of these things are skills that you’re going to need all throughout life. That’s one of the arguments you can use for the voice that says, “I’ve got to worry about this possibility of something that could happen next week.” You can tell yourself, “Okay,” or tell that voice. You don’t know what’s really going to happen next week. But what you do know is you’re going to need mindfulness and alertness and ardency in order to deal with whatever problem comes up. So the best preparation for the future is to do what you’re doing right now. In this way, there’s going to be some running commentary as you’re trying to settle down. The Buddha calls that direct thought and evaluation. It’s actually part of getting the mind to settle down and be quiet. In other words, you’re not trying to snuff out all your thoughts right away. You encourage the good ones that help remind you of why you want to be here, that strengthen the good members of the committee. When the mind finally does become really snug with the breath, the breath feels good. Because this is another thing that direct thought and evaluation does. This is another thing that your running commentary will do, is ask you, “How’s the breath right now? Does it feel good to be here? Does the breath feel too long, too short, too deep, too shallow? What changes can you make?” That kind of running commentary is good as well. If the mind seems really obstreperous, you can pull out some of those reflections from the chants just now. Aging, illness, and death await you out there. Separation. Is that where you want to go? We’ve had these experiences many, many times. And yet we keep going back and forth. And even though they cause us a lot of suffering, it’s largely because the mind can’t even imagine that there’s another way to find happiness. What the Buddha keeps saying is that there is a happiness that doesn’t change, doesn’t disappoint. But as long as you haven’t seen that yourself, it’s just words. This is why you have to use lots of words to convince the part of the mind that you can get pleasure, at least a little bit of pleasure—that of a new job, a new relationship, a new whatever. And you have to be firm with yourself. Ask yourself, “Have you suffered enough?” Here’s a possibility that goes beyond what you might have imagined. Use your opportunity to give it a try. Let’s make the most of this opportunity. See how you can develop a sense of well-being in the mind simply by watching the breath until everything settles down and you’re really firmly here, with a very strong sense of well-being that you don’t have any immediate inclination to want to go wandering off. This doesn’t mean, of course, that the obstreperous voices have totally gone away. It’s just that they’ve fallen silent for a while. This gives you just a beginning taste of how good it can get. It gets a lot better than this. But you begin to see that there is a well-being that comes simply by allowing the mind to settle down, be with itself, not take on any other responsibilities right now. Keeping the breath in mind and being alert to how well you’re staying with the breath. If you do it right, then you come out of the meditation with a strong sense of well-being. And that strengthens the skillful voices inside. You get this intense sense of well-being that doesn’t harm anybody, doesn’t harm you. It’s actually very refreshing, energizing. So as long as the commentary is necessary, keep it up. The commentary that keeps you with the breath, that examines the breath, the commentary that reminds you why you don’t want to go away someplace else. The commentary that pulls you away from any voices that have come in and hijacked things. That’s a very useful commentary to have. Often we hear that meditation is about not thinking. Well, you have to think your way to silence if you want the silence to be solid. So learn how to train your thoughts so that they head in this direction. Then, when they’ve got you here, they can fall silent. Those are the beginning steps of meditation.

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