A Snug Fit

July 17, 2013

Focus on your breath. You’ll notice when you’re focusing on the breath that there are two things. There’s the actual sensation of the breathing, and there’s your mind’s commentary on the breath. And the commentary is needed to keep it there. In the beginning, there’s more commentary needed than When the mind really begins to settle down, then you can drop a lot of the commentary and just have this perception of breath, breath, breath. But before you can reach that point, there are many times when you really have to do a lot of thinking. This is why the Buddha says that an important part of concentration in the beginning stages is what he calls “directed thought and evaluation.” Directed thought is the act of keeping your focus on one topic, and the evaluation is figuring out how well it’s going. Getting the mind to stay with the breath is like trying to fit two pieces of wood together. You have to figure out which piece has to be shaved off a little bit. Sometimes both need to be shaved so you get a nice snug fit. In the same way, there are times when your directed thought has to be directed toward the breath, and other times when it has to be directed toward the mind. Directing it toward the breath means asking yourself, “Is this breath comfortable? Is it a kind of breath you can settle down with? Does it feel good to be right here with the breathing? If the breath isn’t comfortable, it’s like trying to hold an inflated table ball underwater. It doesn’t like being there.” The mind will pop out as soon as your grip gets loosened a little bit. So what can you do to make the mind like being with the breath? Part of it is reminding yourself that the way the breath energy flows in the body really has a huge impact on the health of the body. So if nothing else, you’re giving the body a little bit of medicine as you try to figure out what kind of breathing is good. Parts of the body that you used to shrink away from, you find that you can expand back into through the breathing, opening up areas that were closed off by tension. So you’ve got two kinds of breathing. You’ve got the in-and-out breathing, and then you’ve got the subtle breathing that goes through the body. The breath energies that flow on their own as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So you can evaluate either of those. With the breath going in and out, you can ask yourself, “Is it too long? Too short? Too heavy? Too light? Anything? Too much? Anything?” What can you do to bring it back into a feeling of just right? As the in-and-out breath gets just right, then you begin to get more and more sensitive to the subtle breath energies going through the body. How can you take that sense of ease from the main in-and-out breath and let it spread through the body? This is where we get the Buddha’s image for direct thought and evaluation. The bathman working moisture through his ball of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn’t have soap. They had powder that they would mix with water, kind of like a dough. Then you’d bathe with that. To get the right dough, you had to have the moisture saturating the ball of powder. So you had to knead it through. So think of the breath energy getting kneaded through the different parts of the body. That’s all part of direct thought and evaluation, directed to the breath. I think this is one of Ajaan Lee’s great insights on the physical side of direct thought and evaluation, why it is necessary for concentration. It’s not just an unfortunate wobbling of the mind. It’s actually a necessary part of getting the mind to settle down. And you gain some insight. As he said, this is the discernment factor working in your concentration. If you can use discernment as part of your concentration in the very beginning stages, then it’s that much easier to combine the concentration and discernment as one. Your meditation progresses. It’s simply a matter that the direct thought and evaluation get more and more refined. And the more sensitive you are in evaluating things, the more pleasurable the breath becomes. Again, from Ajaan Lee, the image of sifting flour. If you use a coarse sifter, you just get lumps of flour. If you use a fine one, you get much more refined flour. So that’s working with the breath side. Then there’s working with the side of the mind. There are passages when the Buddha notices that if you try to get the mind to settle in the mind or in the body, things don’t feel right. And you realize that it’s in the mind that the problem is. It’s attitudes, the emotions it’s carrying in from the day, are hard to let go. This is when you have to turn around and use your direct thought with the mind itself, and you bring in what the Buddha calls the different types of recollection. You might try a recollection of death, the realization that death can come at any time. You have no idea when it’s going to happen, but you do know that it will happen. And you do know that you have to let go of everything at that point. In the midst of letting go of everything, you have to keep the mind in a good mood so it doesn’t start acting on unskillful emotions. So are you ready for that? Are you up for that? Usually the answer is no. Well, you’ve got work to do here. This helps to overcome any sense that there’s something out there that’s more important for you to think about right now or something else out there that’s more important for you to do and you shouldn’t be meditating. Maybe you should cut your meditation time short or fill your meditation time with thinking about that topic. But then there’s, of course, the possibility you could die. In which case, whatever that responsibility is, it’s totally voided by the fact that you’re not going to be around. And all of a sudden you begin to realize that a lot of the responsibilities you have—in fact, all the responsibilities that could be pulling you away from your breath right now—are very, very minor in the face of the fact that you really do need to work on the mind to get it ready to die. Or if you’re feeling discouraged in the practice, you can think about the Buddha, you can think about the Sangha, all the troubles that the members of the Sangha went through. You read about them in the Therigatha and the Theragatha. A lot of their troubles were a lot worse than yours, yet they were able to get beyond them. They’re human beings, you’re a human being. If they could do it, why can’t you? In other words, find a topic that you find inspiring. And think about that. Direct your thoughts there. Evaluate that topic in a way that allows you to feel ready to settle down. Because this is what all this type of thinking is about, to get you to the point where you don’t have to do the thinking anymore. To get into deeper stages of concentration, you have to abandon the direct thought and evaluation when they’ve done their work, and then just maintain their perception. Direct thought and evaluation are like thinking in full sentences. Perception is simply a word or an image that holds you with your topic. So what can you do to get the mind and body together right now? In a snug fit, which part needs a little shaving? Focus your thoughts there. Learn how to think skillfully. Evaluate things skillfully, both with the breath and with the mind. So you can take this ability to think and use it to bring the mind to a point where it doesn’t need to think, where it can rest. And yet be alert. It’s one of the most important skills in getting the mind to settle down.

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