Inner Culture

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There’s a book by Thomas Mann, Joseph and His Brothers, a huge four-volume retelling of the Joseph story. And in the beginning of the fourth volume, Joseph is in prison. How does he spend his time in prison? He starts interpreting the dreams of his prison guards and his fellow prisoners. Mann makes an interesting comment. He says, “This is a sign of an educated person.” You can find some activity to keep yourself occupied and happy, even in miserable surroundings. That’s the best kind of education, that you’re able to maintain the well-being of your mind, even when you’re sick. As you’re getting old, even as you’re dying, that would be the ultimate test of your ability to keep the mind in good shape. This is one of the advantages of learning how to meditate, because it’s a skill that you can apply in any situation that you would otherwise find yourself creating trouble for yourself. In other words, complaining about the situation. You look at the education we get, not just in schools but also through the media. We’re an interesting culture. We train ourselves in greed, aversion, and delusion. We expose our children to messages of greed, aversion, and delusion from a very early age. And they’re trained how to complain permanently. So no wonder the culture’s in a mess. But we can learn how to re-educate ourselves. One of the basic principles is that no matter how bad things are outside, your mind does not have to be affected by them. And you can learn the skills, you learn the tools of the trade, to keep yourself well-occupied, happily occupied. Even when things are going not the way you want them to, you’ve still got the mind. And you can decide whether to add more suffering onto the situation or to alleviate it. You’ve got that choice in the present moment. So here we are with the breath. This is the basic tool of our skill. And we’re learning how to evaluate the breath. We talk to ourselves about the breath, and then we play with the breath, experiment with the breath, realizing that the breath energy is the most important part of keeping the body and the mind together. And so you can use it to help with the health of the body, help with the health of the mind. And it’s not just while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s any situation where you have some extra time on your hands. Go straight to the breath. Breathe in in a way that feels really refreshing, really nourishing, really gratifying. Because it’s one area of your life where you have total free range of choice. You may have outside responsibilities where you have to take care of this or sit through meetings or deal with difficult people. But you don’t have to breathe in a way that adds onto your suffering. The reason we do is because, as the Buddha pointed out, we breathe in ignorance. When you hear about dependent-core arising, it sounds awfully complex, but it starts with a really interesting observation. One of the reasons we suffer is because we breathe in ignorance. Bodily fabrication, which is the breath, gets affected by it. And that leads to suffering. Our verbal fabrications, the direct thoughts and evaluations that the mind creates, go off in areas that don’t really have anything to do with helping with suffering or helping with the end of suffering. But if we learn how to do these things with knowledge, bringing in the perception of the breath, filling the body, and learn how to evaluate the breath, think about the breath, and whether it gives rise to a sense of pleasure. When you feel any dis-ease in the body, how can you breathe in a way that’s soothing? Think of the breath as medicine for that part of the body. And when irritated thoughts come up, breathe in a way that takes away some of the irritation. Think in a way that takes away some of the irritation as well. Because if all you can do is sit there and think about how miserable you are, that’s just adding more irritation on top of the other irritation. But if you say, “Here’s an opportunity to breathe in a way that feels really good,” nobody even has to know. Even if they do throw you in prison, you can breathe in a way that’s gratifying. They don’t have to know. So here’s your own secret. Education, your own secret. Culture. You’ve probably heard the old British joke, “What’s the difference between an American and yogurt? Yogurt has culture.” Well, we can show that we have some culture too. And they don’t have to know. This is an internal culture. It’s how you take care of your mind. Like Joseph in this story. Some place along the line, he picked up the talent of learning how to interpret dreams. Of course, in the end of the story, it’s taken him all the way to becoming the advisor of the pharaoh, because he’s able to interpret that one big, important dream. He’s able to save his whole tribe as a result. So who knows where your ability to work with the breath can take you and what it will enable you to be able to do for other people. Because one of the advantages of having this skill is that you can keep your head in the midst of all kinds of chaos. You’re a much better person. You’re in a position to help others. So realize that you’ve got a skill here that can be applied in lots of different situations, even some very negative ones. As I’ve said many times before, who knows what’s going to happen in the future? But one thing you do know is that you’re going to need all your powers of mindfulness and all your powers of alertness to deal with whatever comes up. The more you have, the better you’ll be able to deal with it. So remember, this is a skill that’s not just for sitting with your eyes closed at the end of the day and learning how to relax a little bit. It’s something you carry with you at all times. And that was one of the impressive parts of the story, that Joseph, thrown in prison, was never depressed, never got down. He kept finding some way to keep his spirits up. And you can do some meditation for the same purpose. Remember the values of the meditation, too. It’s not just the technique, it’s the values that go along with it. That your ability to look after your mind is your responsibility. But here are the tools. The Buddha doesn’t just say, “Happy, happy,” and think that that’s going to solve anything. He gives you the specific tools and the skills to make sure you can maintain the well-being of the mind. This is one of the contemplations that monks are supposed to engage in. In fact, King Ashoka included in his list of important Dharma lessons. You’re young now, but you’re not going to be young forever. You’re healthy now, but you’re not going to be healthy forever. The Sangha is in harmony, but that may not be forever. Society is relatively peaceful, but that may not be forever. So you do what you can now. Train your mind in such a way so that even when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, or if society happens to fall apart while you’re alive, or the Sangha manages to split while you’re alive, you’ll be able to maintain your well-being. As far as how bad the situation can get outside, the Buddha has that great image of bandits pinning you down and using a saw to cut off your arms. And the Buddha said, “If you have any ill will for those bandits, they’re not following my teaching.” Spread goodwill to them, and then starting with them, spread goodwill to the entire world. He says, “If you keep this image in mind, you’ll be able to maintain your cool.” You can’t think of any other situation where you couldn’t be able to maintain your cool. That’s not the word he used, of course, but that’s basically what he’s talking about. Keep your cool because you’ve got your breath. You’ve got another breath, and you’ve got another mind. Another foundation for your happiness. So that when other people take away all the other things that they’ve been giving you, or the situation in the world goes up or down, you’ve still got this. Place your happiness here, and it’s safe.

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