Balanced in the Present

August 23, 2013

We’re going to be here for an hour, so try to find a comfortable position for the body and a comfortable position for the mind. For the body, try to sit in a way where your spine is erect. The body feels balanced. You’re not leaning over to the front, not leaning to the back, left or right. You’re facing ahead with your eyes closed. Your hands and your lap. You want the body to be balanced, because otherwise an hour becomes really hard to bear. You have different parts of the body getting squished by an imbalance in your posture. It’s the same with the mind. A comfortable position for the mind is a balanced position. You’re not leaning to the past, not leaning to the future. You’re not leaning to thoughts about what you like or don’t like. Spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions, without favoring any one direction over the others. Your awareness is right here in the middle. Try to keep it balanced on the breath. When the breath comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, you know it’s going out. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths to see how deep your breathing can go. When you breathe in, how far does it go down in the body? The air may go down just as far as the lungs, but how far does the energy flow in the body? Think of it going down through your torso, down through your hips, down to the legs, down to the toes. Think of your whole nervous system being engaged in this flow of energy coming in and going out. Notice how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Make the breath shorter, more shallow. If it’s heavier, lighter, faster, slower. The body breathes in lots of different ways. Some of its ways of breathing are good for it and some are not so good. Usually we don’t notice because we’re paying attention to other things. Now is the time to give your full attention to the breath, like an acrobat trying to learn how to act. Walk across a tight wire. In the beginning, you may find yourself falling off to the left or the right, but just pick yourself back up and try again. You want to get used to being here in the present moment. For the most part, we’re not. Our thoughts are someplace else, some other time. We’re very good at creating thought worlds, but not very good at just watching the world we’ve got right here in the body and the mind. So take some time to develop that sense of balance that keeps you right here. It’s restful for the mind, especially when you’re not having to create all those other thought worlds, and especially when you can get your thoughts away from thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of anger, disappointment. Whatever is usually bothering the mind, take some time out. Step back from those thoughts and give the mind a chance to rest. To really get interested in the present moment, you can go down through the body, section by section, noticing how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, how they feel as you breathe out, where you notice the differences. You may find that different parts of the body respond to different rhythms of breathing or feel soothed by different rhythms of breathing. So go through the body and give everybody a chance to have some nice, refreshing breath energy. When the body feels refreshed in the present moment, that makes it a lot easier to stay here, because we’re not here just to rest. You want to gain a sense of balance and stability in the present moment because you want to look at what the mind is doing. You want to really be able to observe your mind in action, watching especially your intentions, those chants we had just now, the unattractiveness of the body, the facts of aging, illness, death, and separation. Taken on their own, they sound pretty depressing. But they’re there for a purpose, these reflections, to remind you that if you’re looking for your happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die, and that can be separated from you, well, your happiness can age, grow ill, and die, and be separated from you as well. Where you’re going to look for your happiness is that last reflection. You’re the owner of your actions. That’s what’s yours—your decisions to act and then the results of your actions. That stays with you for a long time. And yet for most of us, our intentions are a big blank spot on the map. Often when someone does something, you ask them, “Why did you do that?” Many times they can’t answer right away. They weren’t there. The servants were making the decisions—in other words, parts of your mind that were operating below the radar. Where you were off someplace else, they were doing the work. And a lot of times they simply work out of habit or mood or who knows what. And yet they’re the ones who are shaping your life. So you want to pay a lot of attention to this process of intention so you can be very clear when you’re doing something or saying something or thinking why you’re doing it. What’s your purpose? Ideally, you should be having a purpose in that you’re not going to harm anybody. Yet all too often that doesn’t even get entered into the equation. It’s more, “What do I feel like? Where is the pleasure?” “Where can I get my instant hit?” If those are the principles running your life, well, you can imagine what kind of actions you’re going to do as a result. So we stay with the breath, the greatest sense of well-being, so you’re not so hungry for the instant hit. All you have to do is breathe in, breathe out in a satisfying way, think of the breath, the energy bathing the whole body. And your desperation for every little bit of pleasure gets a lot weaker. And that’s when you can look at your decisions with a lot more objectivity. Look at the options that are open to you. Because these skills that we’re practicing here as we’re meditating, they’re not just for the meditating or not just for sitting here with your eyes closed. As you go through the day, you can have a sense of how the breath energy feels in the body. And when it doesn’t feel right, you can make adjustments. And as you’re staying there in the present moment working with the breath, you begin to notice the intentions that are directing you in different directions. And you can see, are these places you really want to go? Who’s making the plans? If you’re not there as part of the decision-making process, you can’t really trust what the itinerary is going to be. We’d like to hear that the mind is basically good and that we can trust our basic impulses. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. And if you look around you at the way human beings are acting, you see a lot of people acting on very unskillful impulses. And you have to reflect, you probably have the same tendencies as well. This is why the Buddha placed the quality of heedfulness as the number one thing you’ve got to develop as you practice. And that’s another reason why we have those chants on the unattractiveness of the body, aging, illness, and death. Because if you’re not careful, you can search for your happiness in things that are really going to disappoint you. And in the meantime, you’re going to be creating a lot of bad actions, a lot of bad karma. Those are the dangerous. But fortunately, not everything in the mind is bad. There are good qualities as well, and you can learn how to depend on them. If everything in the mind were bad, you’d have to just sit there and wait for somebody else to come along and straighten you out. But that’s not going to happen. What can happen, though, is as your alertness gets more sensitive, your mindfulness gets more solid, you begin to see the patterns of your actions. And you also begin to see that you have choices that you didn’t realize you had before. There are more skillful ways of acting, more skillful ways of thinking, more skillful ways of speaking. And if you act in skillful ways, you find that you really do benefit. And the people around you get some of the side benefits as well. So you can work on developing these qualities so they’re stronger. That’s what the meditation is all about. We’re developing mindfulness, we’re developing alertness, concentration, and a sense of well-being right here. So that treasure of our actions that we have really is a treasure. It’s not just a sack of old garbage or old weights. When you think of your actions, remind yourself that everything you do is going to leave a result. The results of bad actions the Buddha compared to a cart that an ox has to pull. It’s just heavy, heavy, heavy. Whereas the results of good actions follow you around like a shadow. You don’t have to carry them around at all. They’re there when you need them. But there’s no weight to them at all. So try to be heedful of the fact that you have the power of choice, and your choices really do make a difference. And unless the mind is trained, you can’t really trust it. There’s a passage where the Buddha says the mind is so quick to reverse itself that there’s no analogy that you can think of that would be quick enough to do it justice. Even the twinkling of an eye is too slow. So you’ve got to keep watch on your mind. But it is possible. The mind is like a committee. It’s got some obstreperous members, but it’s also got some good members, some clever members, some skillful members. You’ve only got the clever members on the side of what’s skillful and good for you and good for the people around you. The good members can be trained. The members that are more problematic, some of them, as you sort them out, they actually become better. Others, you learn, you just leave them off the committee. It’s because of that fact that we’re able to train ourselves. It’s because of that that heedfulness really does make a difference. So take this opportunity to get the mind used to settling down and being in the present moment, and used to looking at itself. Because these are the skills you need to give your life as a whole a good foundation.

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