Strengthen Your Focus

October 26, 2013

Take a couple of good long deep in- and out-breaths and try to stay with the breathing. Notice where you feel the in-breath, notice where you feel the out-breath, and notice how it feels. Does it feel good for the body? How are you going to know? You have to stay with it. You notice the impact that different rhythms of breathing will have on the body. As for everything else, just let it go. The music in the background, thoughts about the work we’ve done today, thoughts about the work we’re going to do tomorrow, just let those pass, pass, pass. If they come into the mind, don’t get upset, but you don’t have to get involved with them. Be very careful about where you focus your attention and try to keep it in one place. We focus at the breath because important things happen right here in the present moment. When the mind moves, it moves in the present moment. Its thoughts may be about the past or about the future. But the way you actually create those thoughts happens right here, right now. And you want to be able to see that. So you stay focused at the place where it’s easy to see. It’s like a cat wants to catch a mouse, so it stays focused on the mouse hole. Or as I noticed when I was coming up this evening, a lot of people are sitting there staring at their smartphones, hoping for all the information that they can get out of their smartphones. But it’s time to take that kind of concentration and put it at the breath. The problem with that kind of concentration is that even though you have that one smartphone, you’re jumping all around. Contact this person, contact that person, read this person’s email, whatever. But here you’re just focusing on what the mind is doing right here, right now, what the breath is doing right here, right now. And the things that will appear may not necessarily appear right when you want them. It’s like being a hunter. You may decide that you want a rabbit, so you go out to the place where rabbits tend to go. You have to sit there very quietly, but very intently and very alert. If you’re not quiet, you’ll scare off the rabbits. If you’re not alert, a rabbit will go right past you. You won’t know. But you can’t schedule that. You’ll have a rabbit by 3 p.m. or 5 p.m. or whenever, but you go to the place where the rabbits are likely to be. It’s the same here with the breath. The mind will show you interesting things if you stay here very steadily. We’re taking advantage of the fact that the mind knows how to focus on some things and ignore other things. And it’s commenting on things all the time. It may decide that it doesn’t like that music. But the question is, so what? Do you have to be focused on the music? What does the music do to you? What does it do for you? Nothing. If you want, you can make an obstacle out of it, but you don’t have to. You’ve probably noticed this many times when you sit reading a book. There can be a lot of noise around you, but if the book is interesting, you can stay with the book and you don’t get distracted. Try to bring that quality of concentration and interest to the breath. To get interested in the breath, you have to realize that there are many varieties of breathing, and each of them will have a different impact on the body right now and a different impact on the mind. So this is something you can explore. Try long breathing for a while and see how that feels. If it doesn’t feel good, try shorter breathing. Make the breathing more shallow. Make it deeper, heavier, lighter. Play around with it. Notice when your mind is about to slip away. All too often we notice it when it has already slipped away. You find yourself thinking about something totally divorced from the breath. You wonder how you got there. Well, there were steps in how the mind slipped off. And precisely this is what you want to learn how to see. How does the mind fool itself? You think you’re thinking about something, and all of a sudden, zip, you’re off someplace else. And all the machinations were hiding behind the scenes. So you might think of this as, instead of watching a movie, you want to go onto the movie set and see how they make a movie. Then go into the cutting room and see how they create all those special effects. You want to see how the mind fools itself. That’s what you want to learn. Because if the mind can fool itself, it can create a lot of trouble. After all, everything we do is for the sake of happiness. But you may have noticed that a lot of things you do for the sake of happiness end up causing stress, causing trouble. The question is why. Look around, blame it on everybody else. But wise people learn to look within. They learn to see that the mind is constantly shaping its experience, again, by choosing what to focus on and choosing what kind of comments to make on it. And if you’re going to shift your attention, well, why are you shifting your attention? These things are called intentions. Your purpose in doing something. What are your purposes? What are your skills? What are the areas where you’re not very skillful in creating happiness? You want to see the mind clearly because the mind can come up with all kinds of strange desires and shape everything it experiences in line with those desires. All too often it doesn’t ask itself, “Was that desire worthwhile? Is it really in my best interest?” Because all too often we’re hungry. We want a quick fix. We want a quick pleasure. But you realize that the quick fix and the quick pleasure doesn’t always provide any kind of long-term well-being. That’s when you want to look into the mind and say, “What is the mind doing that I can change? Where can I see how it’s fooling itself? Where is it focusing on the wrong things? Where is it making dumb comments on things? Or comments that it thinks are clever, it thinks are right, but they may be about totally the wrong things?” A lot of life is learning how to look at the right spot to keep your attention focused, and how to read that spot. So here’s the spot that really will help you see through all the other issues in the mind by staying focused on the breath in the present moment, because the breath is where the mind and the body meet. And when you’re with the breath in the present, you know you’re in the present, because you can’t watch a future breath and you can’t watch a past breath. It’s just the present breath you’re sensing right now. When you’ve got that as your foundation, then you can step back from all the other movements of the mind and begin to see them, but without getting sucked in. It’s like going into a movie theater. You can either sit there and watch the screen and get sucked into the world of whatever the movie is trying to present, or you can go and sit off on the side and look across the room. What do you see? You see this beam of light flashing from one side of the room to the other, and people sitting in the seats laughing and crying and whatever, all because of those beams of light. Then you begin to realize that all those people you thought were up there on the screen, they’re not people at all. They’re just flashes of light. Why get worked up about them? Why put so much energy into it? Because the mind puts a lot of energy into its thoughts. When you learn how to step back from your unskillful thoughts in this way, then you can focus your attention on what would be a skillful way of thinking, a skillful way of acting, a skillful way of commenting to things on yourself in your mind. So you’re learning how to get some control over the mind by seeing the way it acts, how it moves, why it moves. And you begin to realize that some of the ways it moves are pretty foolish. And there’s a lot of self-deception going on. We look for pleasures and get disappointed, and we go and look for the same pleasures over and over again. Psychologists have noticed this about people. They’re very bad at judging what’s going to cause them happiness. It’s like those billboards when you go into Las Vegas. Slot machines give a 97% return rate. And when they’re telling you right there, you give them a dollar and they’ll give you 97 cents back. And yet people still go. Because they think, “Well, maybe this time I’ll hit the jackpot. Other people will get the two cents or three cents, but I’ll get the big jackpot.” And we keep saying that over and over again. We don’t get the jackpot. So you want to be able to step back and look at your desires and ask, “Okay, where are they fooling me? Where are they lying to me?” And if I’m really truthful with myself, what kind of effort, what kind of thoughts and words and deeds are really worth the effort that really do give rise to pleasure, really do give rise to a long-term happiness that doesn’t have any drawbacks, doesn’t harm anybody, and doesn’t disappoint? The Buddha says, “When you’re generous, when you’re virtuous, when you train the mind in concentration and discernment, these things lead to release. They lead to a true happiness.” All those are his words. And you want to test them for yourself. But before you can test them, you’ve got to train the mind so it’s a reliable witness. If it’s jumping around all the time, you don’t see anything. Your view of the world is like a connect-the-dots picture. There’s just a little dot here, a little dot there. And you could actually connect the dots with any kind of line you wanted to and create any kind of picture. If you really want to see things for what they actually are, you have to look at them continually, focus, stay focused, and not let the mind get pulled away when some other intention suddenly just comes in and swoops in on you and carries you off. You’ve got to learn how to stay in place. So this is why we focus on the breath. One, it’s always here. Two, it’s always in the present moment. And three, it’s where you can really observe the mind and the body very clearly for what they’re doing right now. So you can see through what they’re doing and understand where the mind is lying to itself. Now you can train it to say the truth. Take this quality of being focused and this mind’s habit of commenting on things all the time and have it focus here, comment on here, until things can settle down. In other words, learn how to focus your energy in the right place. And develop the right desire, the desire for happiness that has no harm, the happiness that doesn’t disappoint, the happiness that’s really long-term. That kind of desire is worth looking after. But the Buddha says that all suffering comes from craving. Well, it’s not just any kind of craving. There are three specific kinds of craving that cause suffering. Craving for sensuality, craving to take on an identity in one of your worlds of experience, and the desire then to obliterate that identity when you don’t like it. But there are actually desires that are part of the path, like in that passage we chanted just now. One of the passages said, “In right effort, generate desire to keep unskillful qualities from arising in the mind.” If they have arisen, you generate the desire to get rid of them. Then you generate the desire to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there. And once they’re there, you generate the desire to develop them until they’re fully mature. Those kinds of desires are really worth cultivating. But to test this, as he says, you have to train the mind to be a reliable witness. So it’s not jumping around all the time. Train it to stay right here. Get interested right here. After all, the breath is the energy of life. It’s what keeps the mind and body together. It has a huge impact on the health of the body and the health of the mind. It’s like free medicine that’s sitting right here, and yet we don’t realize that it’s medicine. It’s like going out in the shower or the chaparral. There are lots of plants out there that the Indians used to use for medicine—medicines that really worked. Yet if you were to ask us to go out in the chaparral right now, you wouldn’t know what to pick, what to avoid, because you don’t have any training. You’re not familiar with the medicine there. It’s the same with the breath. The different ways you breathe can act like medicine. Soothe the body and mind when they need to be soothed. Energize them when they need to be energized. And you learn this by being observant, by paying some attention to them. You’re not paying attention to all the random noises that are out there. As for the noises, just think of them going right through you. Think of your body as being like a big screen. The wind can go through the screen. But the screen doesn’t catch it. You don’t have to make comments on the noise. Just stay with the screen. Stay with the sense of the body, the mind, the breath, right here. And you’ll find that there’s a lot to learn.

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