Living in Death Valley

November 16, 2013

Breathe deeply for a while to see how deep breathing feels and to energize the breath energy in the body. When you feel you’ve had enough of deep breathing, you can let the rhythm of the breathing change. Shorter, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Take advantage of the fact that you have some control over the breath. It’s one of the few bodily processes that you can control directly. So you’re going to have a good place to settle down here in the present moment. The mind needs something to feed on. If it doesn’t have anything good to feed on inside or feed on in the present moment, it goes feeding other places—thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future. A lot of the stuff it feeds on is bad for it. It’s like eating spoiled food. We tend to feed on what the Buddha calls the ways of the world. There’s material gain, status, praise, physical pleasure. But these foods can also change into their spoiled versions. There’s loss of gain, loss of status, criticism, and pain. And the good things are quick to spoil. Of course, when you feed on spoiled things, or things that are about to spoil, it gives you indigestion. It’s the same with the mind. You hope to find happiness in material wealth or in status, people’s respect for you or their praise for you, the physical pleasures you can get. But when these things turn, you realize you’re still stuck with suffering. We see other people do this, and it’s very easy to see that they’re being foolish. But when it’s us, it’s hard to see, because we feel we need to feed. So what the Buddha’s teaching is a way to feed inside so you don’t have to feed on things outside. And that allows you to step back from them so you don’t have to suffer from them. It’s a healthy way of depersonalizing things. It’s not that you don’t care at all. But you realize that your happiness doesn’t have to depend on those things, and the edge that they tend to have isn’t so sharp. So learn how to feed well in the breath, feed well in a state of stillness in the present moment, to whatever extent you can get the mind to settle down and to feel at ease here, the better source of food you’ll have here in the present. So take some interest in the breath. What kind of breathing would be delicious right now, would feel nourishing right now? Where in the body do you find that there’s a need for more breath energy? Next time you breathe in, think of the energy going there. Don’t force it, because the breath doesn’t respond well to pressure. It’s something that flows very quickly. It can flow through all kinds of things in the body. But we build up walls of tension, and then that directs the breath in a way that’s not so healthy. And some parts are cut off. So think of everything opening up, opening up. And then learn how to stay with that sense of being opened up. That’s something you’ve got to learn how to protect. It’s all too easy to drop it because you’re suddenly interested in something else, and everything in the body begins to close up again. So you’re learning a new habit in how you relate to the breath energy in your body. Staying with that sense of open relaxation, regardless of what’s happening around you, what thoughts come into the mind. Try to keep all the energy channels open. Have all the different parts of the body well nourished. Think of the breath going down the spine, and from the end of the spine down through the legs. Coming in the middle of the chest, going down through the torso, down the arms, out to the fingers, all around the head, in through the eyes, the ears, in from the back of the head, down from the top of the head. Notice where you feel that there are intersections in the energy channels. It’s like you have a system of roads inside. And the intersections are the parts that can control the flow of energy. It’s like an accident, an intersection, can block off several roads all at once. Try to keep the intersections clear. John Lee points them out as being in the middle of the head, middle of the forehead, the palate, tip of the nose, base of the throat, middle of the chest, front of the stomach. Notice where you feel them, in which directions the energy flow feels good and in which directions it doesn’t feel so good. Sometimes there’s too much down-flowing energy and you get lethargic, or too much up-flowing energy and you get tense and headachy. So gain a sense of how the breath energy can best be monitored. And gain a sense of skill in how you direct it in the right direction. Then you can feed off the pleasure. Don’t drop the breath to pay attention to the pleasure. Because it’s the fact that you’re attending to the breath like this that gives rise to the pleasure. So take a deep breath and allow the pleasure to do its work all around the different parts of the body. If you find that the breath gets more and more subtle, that’s fine, as long as your awareness fills the body. If the breath gets subtle and your range of awareness gets small, you tend to drift off. So when things are subtle, try to keep that broad sense of awareness. Stay from the head down to the toes and do your best to maintain that. That way you nourish yourself with good energy inside. And then when you look at the ways of the world, you can see them in more impersonal terms. We see other people going for material wealth and doing stupid things, and we can see how stupid it is. But then when we go for it, it doesn’t seem so stupid. Why is that? Because we’re feeding on it. We feel that that’s our source of food, and all of a sudden it becomes very important. And what we know in the abstract doesn’t help us with the particulars. But when you are particularly well-fed with the breath energy, with the sense of nourishment that comes from the concentration on the breath, and the sense of skill in relating to the breath, then all those abstract things you know can more easily become important. The Buddha talks about learning how to depersonalize pain, depersonalize unkind words. There’s one point where he says, “When someone says something unpleasant, just tell yourself, and the unpleasant sound is made contact at the ear.” How many times have you thought that when someone’s been yelling at you? All too often you get involved in the narrative, “Why are they yelling at me? Why do they disrespect me? Why are they mistreating me?” And there’s this “they” and “me” and “they” and “me” that you add to this. But if you have a sense of well-being that you can maintain in spite of that, you can just watch the words go past, and you don’t have to suck them in. And you realize that this is the way of the world. There are kind words, and there are unkind words. There are thoughtful words, and there are thoughtless words. These are true and false. This is the nature of human speech. When you can depersonalize things this way, it’s a lot easier to deal with them because you’re not pulling them in. You’re not trying to feed on them. They’re just there in the world. It’s like going out in the desert and seeing borax and salt all over the desert floor. Because it’s not yours, it’s not related to you, you just see it as a strange fact of nature. That’s it. Because you’re carrying food with you, you’re not trying to feed off the soil or feed off the plants. If you don’t have your own food, then you’re really hard up. It’s like going to Death Valley and seeing the old days when pioneers were coming across Death Valley. That’s why they named it Death Valley, because it was deadly. There was nothing there, just a lot of heat and dryness. No decent water. And because they didn’t have good supplies, it was a horrible place to be. Nowadays, people come from all over the world to see Death Valley, because the supplies are there. And you can experience the heat and you can experience the strange surroundings. And they’re interesting, because you’re not laying claim to them. You’re not trying to feed off of them. If you’re hungry and thirsty and you’re out in the middle of Death Valley, it’s going to seem horrible. Well, it’s the same with so many other things in the world. If you have your own source of nourishment inside, the world is just an interesting place to be. “Oh, this is the way people are. This is the way my karma is,” whatever you think about it. But because you’re not ingesting it, you’re not hungry for it, you don’t have to suffer. You don’t get the indigestion that comes from trying to feed off of these things. So look very carefully at your feeding habits. And if you find that you’re upset by what people think about you, or what people are saying about you, or how things are going financially, or whatever the ways of the world are affecting you right now, how much of the suffering that comes from that, it comes from the fact that you’re feeding on it. Can’t you find something better to feed on? Well, this is what the breath is for. This is what meditation practice is for. It’s to give you a better source of food. So you don’t have to suffer when the food offered by the ways of the world starts to spoil. You don’t gain indigestion because the food is out there and you’ve got your own source of food inside. So the things out there can spoil, and that’s just the way of the world. And it’s because you’ve got this internal source of nourishment that you accept the ways of the world for what they are. You make what changes you can, and you realize there are a lot of things you can’t change. But because you’re not feeding on it, it’s not that big an issue. And you’re in a much better place to step back and see what really can be done and what can’t be done. So you can be like the tourists in Death Valley. It’s an interesting experience, not a place you want to live, not a place you want to eat. Try to feed. So when things change, they don’t keep you in digestion. You maintain your health because you’ve got good nourishing food inside.

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