Protect Your Concentration

March 31, 2014

Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and notice what you feel. You may feel the air coming in and out of the nose, or the chest rising, or the abdomen rising. Or you may feel other sensations in other parts of the body as well. It’s those sensations of energy that we refer to when we talk about the breath that we’re going to focus on. Without that movement of energy, the air couldn’t come in and out of the lungs. Then you focus on the breath because it helps keep you in the present moment. It gives you a good place to stay. It’s one of the few processes of the body that you can actually exert some control over. If long breathing feels good, continue long breathing. If it doesn’t, you can change the rhythm, make it slower, faster, shorter, even deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. There are lots of different ways that you can experiment with the breath. And no one else can tell you when the breathing is comfortable. You have to be sensitive. That’s another reason why the breath is good, because it helps increase your sensitivity in the present moment. You can focus on this energy anywhere in the body, anywhere where it feels congenial to keep your mind focused. The breath feels good. If there are any pains in the body, don’t focus on them right away. Save them for later. First try to nourish the parts of the body that can be made comfortable. If your mind wanders off, just drop whatever it is that pulled you away from the breath and you’ll be right back to the breath. There’s really nowhere else to go. Unless it’s into another thought, just drop that. And each time you come back to the breath, try to reward yourself with a really nice, gratifying breath so the mind will be more and more inclined to want to come back. That’s basically how you do the meditation. The trick, though, lies in learning how to keep doing it. How to protect it. While you’re here, protecting it means not giving in to any distractions that might pull you away and not falling asleep. If you find that the rhythm of breathing you’ve chosen does put you to sleep, make the breath stronger, deeper. Emphasize the in-breath. You’re trying to bring the mind into a balanced state. For it does feel good being right here, and it feels secure being right here. That takes some doing. It’s a skill, and as with any skill, it takes time. And you have to be willing to make a few mistakes and then learn from the mistakes so you get a sense of what it does mean to be balanced here and what the breath that’s really just right feels like. Once you’re able to get the breath comfortable in one spot of the body, you can start spreading that sense of well-being around. Think of the breath energy flowing all over the body in a way that feels nourishing and connected. You can do this one section of the body at a time. It’s going to go through the body systematically, part by part, so you can become more familiar with the different parts of the body and how the breathing energy feels in them. The more and more familiar you get, you can start connecting the different parts up until you’ve got the whole body connected. So there’s a sense that the energy of the breathing flows freely throughout the whole body. Then your awareness, even though it’s centered in one spot, is all around. You aware of everything from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, all at once. That’s what you’re working toward. If you find yourself getting lost trying to maintain that whole body awareness, go back to one spot. Learn to get really secure there before you try spreading your awareness again. We do this because we want to be able to observe our own minds. The whole point of the Buddhist teachings is to help us understand where we’re creating unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves and how we can put an end to it. And a lot of that comes from very subtle movements of the mind. These are things we’re doing all the time, but we don’t notice because they’re taken for granted. And they’re more subtle than the things that we are paying attention to. So first we anchor the mind in the present moment with the breath, and then we allow the breath to get more subtle. Because the breath energies in the different parts of the body are a lot more subtle than just the in-and-out breath. And as you get more sensitive to them, there’s an even greater sense of well-being that comes with being here. And you begin to sense movements of the mind you never noticed before. The way the mind creates a thought and then jumps into it and then goes. The more quickly you can catch yourself in the act of doing that, the more you can see these are the steps by which the mind deceives itself. Everything we do consciously is for the purpose of happiness, pleasure, well-being. So why is it that we do things that end up causing ourselves to suffer? It’s out of our ignorance. And particularly, it’s our ignorance of what we’re doing while we’re doing it. So you work with the breath towards yourself. Catch yourself in a good, solid position here, a good, quiet position here. So in those movements that would lead toward stress or suffering—greed, aversion, delusion—when they move, you’re aware of it. And you also see that you don’t have to go with them. That’s where the discernment comes in. We’re here to understand the workings of our minds. It’s a point that’s easy to forget sometimes when you get into really deep concentration. There’s a sense you’ve reached some sort of ground of being or oneness, non-duality, or whatever. And they’re nice states to be in. But again, you want to look at what are you doing that gets you into those states and keeps you in those states. There’s what the Buddha calls “fabrication” going on. We have a way of shaping our experience. And you always want to keep that in mind, that that’s what we’re here for—to see how we’re doing that and to see where we’re not doing it skillfully and how we can change our habits. And to see that, you have to learn how to protect this sense of being centered and in the body, not only while you’re here with your eyes closed, but also as you go through the day. And this involves changing some of your attitudes of what you’re doing in the course of the day. Just a simple thing like looking at things. When you look at things, what are you looking for? Many times it’s innocent, but sometimes it’s not. Sometimes greed is doing the looking, or lust is doing the looking, or anger is doing the looking. The same with listening. Certain senses of sound you really want to hear, and sometimes you want to hear them because they’ll make you angry. That’s one of the interesting paradoxes about the mind. This is what hate radio is all about. You turn it on because you know you get angry, either with the person who’s denouncing other people or at the person who’s denouncing other people. Yet the mind takes pleasure in that, and that destroys your center. You’re off someplace else. This doesn’t mean you don’t look at anything or listen to anything. It’s just that you be very careful about what your motivation is and also what are the effects of looking at certain things or listening to certain things. There are certain details that’ll set you off, certain ways of looking that will set you off, or ways of listening. So you have to look in different ways or listen in different ways so you can protect your concentration. Another problem is that we want to gain insights. We’ve heard that you can get the mind still and you’re going to gain all sorts of insights into yourself. Sometimes you start following this thought, “That might be an insight, that might be an insight,” and just wear the mind out. You can destroy your concentration. You may gain a few insights, but then if your concentration is destroyed, you’ve lost the source. It’s like the old story about the goose that laid the golden eggs. You get a couple of golden eggs and so you kill the goose, thinking you get more of the gold. But of course that puts an end to the gold. You’ve got to learn how to look after the goose. Or in the Buddhism, it’s like being a cook. You’ve got to figure out what your concentration needs and how you can protect it in the same way that a cook has to notice. Say you’re working for a king. What kind of food does the king like today? Does he want sweet food or salty food? Bland food? Spicy food? The king won’t tell you, but you have to notice. What is the king reaching for? What is the king looking for? That’s what you provide. The king here is your concentration. You have to treat the concentration with some respect. Treat it like a king. Kings are pretty picky. Your mind’s concentration can be pretty picky as well. So you have to have a strong sense that the mind being centered really is a treasure, something you really want to maintain. Because it’s when the mind is centered like this that you can see things more clearly, both inside and out. One of the other issues when you’re out trying to maintain your concentration as you go through the day is that on the one hand, the concentration is very sensitive, and it will make you more sensitive to other people’s energies, other people’s actions. So you have to think of the breath energy filling the whole body so you’re not a victim of their energies or actions. In other words, you’re aware of what they say, you’re aware of what they do, you know when negative energy is coming at you, but you don’t allow an opening into your space. This is one of the reasons why we try to develop this full body awareness in the sense of the breath filling the body as well. So you can fully occupy your body and be safe from the energies around you. So you want to learn how to bring the mind into concentration, and then a lot of the skill is in learning how to protect it. And in protecting it, you’ll find that the concentration will give you some insights. You see the movements of your mind, and you see where they’re causing unnecessary stress, and you realize you don’t have to think in those ways or perceive things in those ways. You’ve got alternatives. Those are the insights that come from the meditation. You also need other insights that help protect the meditation, realizing that as you go through the day, you don’t know what’s going to happen in the course of the day, but you do know that you will have to be very mindful, very alert, and very centered to deal with unsuspected surprises, unsuspected dangers. Even some unsuspected dangers that you don’t see as dangers, that you actually see as nice things outside, but they could have a bad effect on your concentration. You have to realize that to deal with those things wisely and with discernment, you need to come from a good, strong center. So treat your concentration with respect. Learn how to bring the mind here, and then learn how to keep it here. While you’re sitting with your eyes closed, when you get up, try to maintain a sense of being centered inside the breath energy, inside the body, because that’s your position of strength. It’s also what helps you see a lot more clearly what you’re doing, because that was one of the Buddha’s main insights. There’s plenty of stress and suffering in the world, but the stress and suffering that weigh the mind down are the stress and suffering that you create without realizing it. So the emphasis always is on getting the mind still so you can see the mind when it begins to move, so you can train it how to move more skillfully.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140331_Protect_Your_Concentration.mp3>