At the Checkpoint

April 16, 2014

The basic instructions for breath meditation are pretty straightforward. Close your eyes. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. The breathing isn’t just the air coming in and out of the nose. It’s the movement of the energy through the body that expands the lungs, expands the ribcage, and sometimes raises the shoulders of the abdomen. It allows the breath to come in, and then as it relaxes, it allows the breath to go out. That’s what you want to focus on. It’s the feeling of that energy wherever you notice it in the body. Allow your attention to settle there and stay with it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, all the way through every breath. That’s where the meditation gets difficult, is the staying. But that’s what makes all the difference. The mind is used to jumping around, looking at this for a bit, and then jumping off someplace, looking at that for a bit, thinking about this, thinking about that. And very rarely it looks at anything very continually. And as a result, all of its knowledge and understanding is in little bits and pieces, which we then stitch together in our mind, depending on how we want to understand things. Notice how we want to understand them. But to understand them for what they’re actually doing, that requires that you watch things continually to see exactly what is connected to what else. This requires a little bit of experimentation as well. For instance, with the breath. You can experiment with long breathing for a while and see how that feels, and then short breathing, see how that feels. Deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, to see what feels best for the body right now. If you find something good, stick with it until it doesn’t feel quite so good anymore. Then you can change. Try to keep on top of the body’s needs, because as the mind begins to settle down and is thinking less and less, the needs of the body are going to change. And you want to stick with it. Then when the breath gets comfortable, try to see if you can expand your awareness to fill the whole body, so that you’re aware of your main center, whichever part you’re able to notice the breathing most easily. But also be aware of how the energy flow feels in the rest of the body as well. You can go through the body section by section. Watch each section for a while as you breathe in and breathe out to see how the breathing feels there. In some sections you’ll notice it more clearly than others. But try to have a sense that the whole nervous system is involved, the whole blood system is involved, because there are subtle energies going through the whole body. And you want to make sure that everything is all coordinated, so that the different parts of the body aren’t working at cross-purposes. This makes you more sensitive to the present moment and also gives you something to do while you’re sitting here. Because if there’s nothing to do but watch in, out, in, out, in, out, pretty soon the mind is going to go out and just wander off and find something more interesting. But you want to sensitize yourself to the present moment. And with a larger awareness, it’s a lot easier to stay awake. If your awareness gets very small, you can just ride with the comfort for a while and then ride away from the breath, drift off. And that doesn’t allow you to see anything clearly either. So you want to stay right here and fill your body with your awareness. And think of the breath energy filling the body as well. And then try to maintain that. Because the breath is basically a lure for the mind. We want to watch the mind here in the present moment to see what it’s doing. And so we can get a sense also of the effect of what it’s doing. That’s the way you want to watch continuously. So that when the mind has a certain kind of thought, you want to notice, how does it affect the breath energy in the body? What kind of feelings does it give rise to? And how do those feelings in turn have an effect back on the mind again? That chant we had just now, “May all beings be happy,” including “May I be happy,” that’s why we’re meditating. We’re looking for a happiness that allows other beings to be happy too. Most forms of happiness in the world are not like that. You gain, somebody else loses. They gain, you lose. But with the happiness that comes from generosity, that comes from virtue, and that comes from meditation, nobody loses. It’s a happiness that spreads around. It erases boundaries between you and people outside. And how do you find that happiness? Well, that other part of the chant, “All beings are the owners of their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.” You want a full heir to happiness. That comes from being very skillful in your intentions, because that’s where your actions basically come from, the intentions of the mind. That’s why we want to be here in the present moment, is to watch those intentions. It’s the present intentions of the mind that are shaping your life. And these are the intentions you can do something about. Your past intentions are gone. Future intentions, well, you don’t know what the future’s going to bring. But you can get a sense of the quality of your intentions right here. But again, that requires that you be very sensitive right here as well, because your intentions can disguise themselves. An intention that’s based on greed or aversion or delusion can disguise itself as something else. That’s how it slips things past your checkpoint. Assuming that there is somebody at the checkpoint, all too often we’re not here at the checkpoint at all. We’re off looking at something else, past, future, anything but right now. So our intention can smuggle things into the mind and then from there into our words and our deeds, to the point where sometimes we’re surprised at the things we do or say. We don’t know why we did it or have only a vague notion of why we did it. But after all, with the intentions shaping your life, you want to be very careful about what they’re doing. You want to be watching. So one, you’ve got to get at the checkpoint, i.e., right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath. And two, you have to be very careful at watching what’s coming past the checkpoint. You probably know the famous story of the person who was carrying a load of sand on a wheelbarrow past a checkpoint. Every day he’d come with a wheelbarrow full of sand and they were sure he was smuggling something because he was doing it every day. But they checked through the sand and they couldn’t find anything at all. And then finally they discovered he was smuggling wheelbarrows. That’s what your mind does. It can slip things right past you without disguising all that much, but it can distract you, make you look at something else while something gets slipped through the checkpoint. So you want to be here and you want to be careful and you want to be sensitive. You can recognize a skillful intention. You can recognize a disguised intention. See through the disguise. And that requires you to stay here continually. Really get to know the checkpoint, really get to know the road, really get to know the people coming back and forth. So that’s why we stay here in the present moment. The reason we try to develop a sense of comfort is twofold. One, it makes it easier to stay. If you feel irritable and irritated by your meditation object, you’re not going to stick with it for very long. And secondly, the sense of ease and well-being provided by the breath when you look after it carefully can provide nourishment for the mind, a sense of well-being, a sense of strength. It allows you to not be so hungry for whatever the mind cooks up. Sometimes it’ll present you with some greed and you’ve just got to go with it because the greed looks good, looks delicious. Sometimes anger looks delicious. We can take a lot of pleasure out of our anger, but it’s the kind of pleasure that only hungry minds would go for. So you feed the mind with a sense of well-being. Breathe in, breathe out, allow your entire chest, the area around the heart, the area down through the torso, to feel that it’s nourished by the breath. Think of all the little muscles in your head being nourished by the breath. And the sense of well-being, the sense of refreshment that comes from staying here, adjusting the breath so it feels really good coming in, really good coming out. Why would you hunger after a little bit of greed or anger? That way you’re less willing to go along with the disguises that the mind presents to disguise its greed as something delicious or its anger as something delicious. You see right through them. So take some time to get familiar with the breath so you can adjust it so that it provides what the body needs in a sense of well-being regardless of what state the body’s in. This will be especially useful as illness comes, aging comes, even as death comes. You want to be able to keep the mind in a good mood all the way up to the last moment so it’s not flailing around. You want to be able to take it through an illness so that even though there may be pains in the body, you know how to make other parts of the body comfortable through the breath energy. This is a skill that can be helpful in all kinds of ways. So take some time to get familiar with the breath and the breathing process in the body. So you can understand what the mind is doing and work only on skillful intentions, the kinds of intentions that will give rise to the happiness you want and the happiness that causes no problem for anyone else. Because it doesn’t need to take anything away from anyone else. It comes from your skill in dealing with your own mind. So you become heir to good actions, skillful actions. Actions that help you see through the way you’ve been creating unnecessary stress or suffering for yourself and allow you to abandon the cause of that suffering. So you can see deeper and deeper into the mind to get to the point where you see there’s something of real value right in here, again, right at the present moment. It lies beneath all those actions and intentions. But to see through them, you have to train them first. So there are skillful intentions. Those are the ones you can see through most easily because they don’t come with a lot of disguises. They’re the ones that allow you to see deeper and deeper into the mind. you

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