Take Care of Your Mind

April 18, 2014

When you meditate, you’re creating a home for the mind, a place where you can rest, gather your strength, and find shelter. We go through the world and there are a lot of things bombarding us all the time. And it’s good to have a place inside where the bombardment can’t reach. So to make this a home, of course, like any case where you make a house a home, you have to make some adjustments. When you first start focusing on the breath, it seems like the least inviting place to stay. There’s nothing much going on. There’s in and there’s out. And the mind is so used to slipping off to other things that it has trouble staying here. But you have some patience and take some interest in the breath, because it has lots of different ins and outs. There’s deep breathing and shallow breathing, heavy breathing, light breathing, fast, slow, narrow, broad. And you come to an understanding and experiment to see what the body needs right now. And how will you know when you’ve got it right? Well, there’s no way to tell you that. You just notice for yourself what feels good. When you’re tired, an energizing breath feels good. When you’re tense, a more relaxing, gentle breath feels good. It’s usually good at the beginning of the meditation to start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to make sure you’re not starved of oxygen. And because long breathing is easier to observe. But after a while, it might get tiresome, so you can change. Think of as much of the body being involved in the breathing process as possible. At the very least, your whole torso. When you get really sensitive with the breath, you come to realize that the energy flows through the nerves as well. And the nerves, of course, go all the way out to your toes, your fingers, out to every pore of your skin. You can think about that whole area being involved in the breathing process. Because when we talk about focusing on the breath, that’s what we’re talking about. It’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nostrils. It’s the movement of energy through the body. And you notice, after a while, that that energy has many levels. So focus on whichever level is easiest to observe, and do your best to stay there. The more comfortable you can make it, the more the mind will want to stay. But as the breath gets comfortable, you have to expand your sense of awareness so you don’t drift off. Otherwise, it gets small. And then you have the opposite problem. Instead of distraction, sleepiness. The mind just drifts away, and sometimes you come back and you wonder, “Where were you?” So you’ve got to find a balance. And it’s in finding that balance that this becomes your home. It needs a place to rest. It gets so involved in all of its other connections outside that it’s very hard for it to find time to be connected to itself. You want to be able to observe it, to know what’s going on. First, get it in a good mood. When the breath feels refreshing, it feels soothing, it’s like a medicine that you apply. You get a sense of ease and well-being coursing through the body. And that’ll have a good effect on the mind, because the mind needs a space where it can step back, not only to rest but to get a perspective on things, to pull yourself out of the narratives of the day. Then look back on them. What did you do right? What did you do wrong? What lessons can you learn for tomorrow? It’s good to have a place where you can pass these judgments with a sense of fairness and not being threatened by noticing, “Oh, you made a mistake in what you did or what you said or what you thought.” Because you’re coming from a position of well-being, a place of safety. And it’s good to be able to tap into the center, not only when you’re here sitting with your eyes closed, but as you go through the day. You notice that the breath is always there. When the mind isn’t engaged in anything else, you can come back here. It’s like recharging. There’s an analogy they use a lot in the forest tradition. It’s like sharpening a knife. As you’re using your mind, as you go through the day, you’ve got to cut through this problem, cut through that problem. And like any knife, after a while, you do a lot of cutting and it starts getting dull. So you have to take time. Of course, over there, when you’re sharpening a knife, it’s not zip, zip, through the knife sharpener. It takes a while. You have to find a stone and you have to know how to do it properly. But it’s all time well spent, because then the next time you have to use the knife, just one chop and there you are. It’s a cut. So having this home here, it’s all part of learning how to care for your mind, learning how to look after it well, so you can use it well when you have to use it and allow it to rest and be prepared for the next time you have to use it. At the same time, you start getting a lot of insight into yourself, and see when the mind goes running out after something. Why does it go running? What’s it looking for? And who’s doing the running? When you look at something, is it greed doing the looking, or is it anger doing the looking? Or is it simply that the mind is a desire to know? If it’s greed or anger, you have to watch out, because it’s going to feed the greed and anger in the mind. It’s like having animals in your house that you really shouldn’t be feeding, because they’re going to take over. To think in terms of another analogy, it’s like having a post. You’ve got lots of different animals and you tie them all to a leash. Each leash is tied to the post. So when the animals want to go running off, they can’t go very far. They have to stay right here. The alternative is having them tied on leashes and having the leashes all tied together, but there’s no post. So whichever animal is strongest is going to drag the other ones along. Because you don’t want your mind to get dragged around like that, it’s going to be good to have this post right here. So when you do some looking or listening, you know why you’re doing it, and you know what impact it’s going to have on the mind. The mind really needs to be cared for. You can’t just look at anything you want in any way you want, or listen to anything in any way you want. Sometimes you aggravate greed, aversion, and delusion. That’s like aggravating an old wound. Or eating the kind of food that’s going to cause an old illness to come back. You’ve got to be very careful. Look after your mind, because it’s your most valuable possession. Even your body isn’t as valuable as your mind. I mean, you can lose parts of your body and still not die. But if the mind loses its center, a lot of its good qualities can die. And that’s really something to be on the lookout for, something you don’t want to have happen. So take some time. Give the mind a place to rest where it can sharpen its tools, and it can step back from all the bombardment from outside and have its own space. So that when you live in the world, you’re not totally pulled into the world. You function, you see what’s going on, you can interact with other people. But you want to try to maintain this sense of the still center right here. And so I used to call this monastery a quiet corner. I talk about how it’s important not only to get your mind quiet while you’re here, but also to get it quiet when you go. And you do that by developing the skill of how to work with your breath. Because the breath is where the mind and the body meet, and the breath is one of the few processes in the body that can be adjusted simply through your awareness in the present moment. So try to work on both the body and the mind so they have a snug fit right here, so it really does feel like a home. And then you have a home you can take wherever you go. So you never feel in an alien place or a threatened place, because you’ve got something solid right here, something familiar right here. It’s one of the best things you can do for yourself.

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