The Skills of a Hunter

May 1, 2014

Survey your body and survey your mind to survey the body. Notice what kind of breathing feels good now. Experiment. I hear many people saying they can’t figure out what kind of breathing feels good. Well, keep trying. Learn how to compare. Breathe long for a while and see how that feels, what kind of effect it has on the body. And try shorter breathing. Not just four or five breaths. Stick with it for a while until you gain a sense of what kind of effect it has. Then deeper, more shallow. Stick with it long enough so you can see, “Oh, this is different from that. This has a different effect on the body.” If it doesn’t feel right, stop, change. It’s only by experimenting that you find out, that you learn things. As for surveying the mind, ask yourself what attitudes you’re bringing in from the day. Is your mind leaning toward irritation or is it leaning more towards desire? What can you do to counteract it? How about your energy level? Is the mind alert? Is it wired? Is it sluggish? What can you do to correct? You’ve got to learn how to read your body, read your mind, if you’re going to be able to get good results in the meditation. We’re not just sitting here being with whatever comes up. Because what happens then is that the mind — whatever comes up — is coming from things that you’re not really observing. You think you’re just dealing with things as they are, but there’s a lot of fabrication, there’s a lot of intentional shaping of things that goes underground. And if you don’t thwart it, if you don’t get in the way, it’s just going to keep on doing its thing and you never get to notice it. So by consciously working with the breath, consciously trying to work with your mood, you run up against things that you didn’t notice were there before. This is how you learn about the mind. And if nothing comes up, then try to get interested in working with the breath. After all, the energy flow in the body is going to have a huge impact on your health. And if nothing else, you’re here in the present moment, you’re engaged, there’s a sense of well-being, and you’re right at the right spot to notice when something does come up. You’ll be able to see it. This is how we develop patience. Not that we just sit there not doing anything at all, waiting for things to happen. We give ourselves something to do while we’re working to stay here. So we’re here with a sense of well-being that sustains our patience. There are periods in the meditation when nothing much seems to happen. So you have to learn how to sit with that, and not just sit. Sit with it in a way that you can maintain your alertness, maintain your interest. One of the forester johns made the comparison with being a hunter. The hunter goes out, he’s waiting for the animal, he has an idea where the animals tend to be, so he goes there. But he can’t make an appointment with the animal, saying, “Come by by two o’clock so we can get you back into the pot by five and have dinner by six.” He has to wait until the animal comes. He has to be alert, otherwise the animal will go right past him and he won’t notice. But he can’t make any noise. He has to be very still, otherwise he’ll scare the animal away. It’s the same with meditation. You have to learn how to be alert and still at the same time. And that requires a lot of balance, dealing with a lot of things that will come in and distract you and pull you away. So by being careful, being alert, engaged with the breath, engaged in making the breath comfortable, you’ve got two things going for you right there. The sense of ease that makes it easier to want to stay here, and the sense of being engaged. Because what do those hunters do as they’re trying to stay there still? Well, they learn how to entertain themselves, thinking about something that doesn’t distract them too much from what they’re looking for, but enough to keep them interested. So we’re here trying to hunt down our greed, aversion, and delusion in all their various guises. We can’t make an appointment for when they’re going to come. And sometimes they come and they just overwhelm you. You’re on their side. Because they do have their pleasures. The Buddha talks about the pain of the path, the pain that comes from working on the path, doing things that are skillful. It’s not easy all the time. It’s not hard all the time, but there are going to be patches when it’s not easy. You need to learn how to give yourself energy, give yourself a sense of conviction that what you’re doing here is really important. This is why we have those chants about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every evening. We remind ourselves that the Buddha was really a special person. The Dhamma he taught was special. The people who followed it and gained awakening are special too. And we’re here because we want some of that special thing that they found. And we remind ourselves that it’s a harmless goal. No one else is injured in any way. No one else is harmed in any way as you practice. It’s totally blameless. And that kind of well-being is hard to find in this world. You look at the well-being that comes from trying to maintain a healthy economy, and there’s a lot of exploitation, there’s a lot of oppression, there’s a huge waste of the world’s resources. Look at every great economy, every great empire. They’ve basically used up all the resources that they needed, and then they die out. So the pleasures that come from creating a good society and a good world have a lot of downsides. The pleasure of the well-being, and the Buddha calls it the ultimate happiness, that comes when you find the deathless, has no downsides at all. It’s not feeding off of anything. It doesn’t require that you take anything from anyone at all. And the path leading there, as I say, is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. It develops a nobility that’s hard to find in this world. That’s why it’s called the noble path. It’s part of a noble search for something that doesn’t change, doesn’t take anything away from anyone. It’s a noblest goal you can set for yourself. And as long as you haven’t yet seen that level of result, you have to go on conviction. So think of any of the recollections that the Buddha recommends. They can give rise to that sense of conviction. They can give energy to your practice, to see it through the hard times, the times that require a lot of patience, the times that require a lot of equanimity. It’s not just a matter of sitting there and enduring them. You want to learn to fire yourself up so that you’re there, present, alert. Still. Ready for whatever skillful or unskillful qualities that come up in the mind, so you can recognize them and deal with them quickly. So in reading the body and reading the mind, it’s not just a matter of reading them and putting them aside. You read them so you can figure out what can be done. To get you on the path and to keep you on the path. No one else can do this for you. But you have all the resources you need in order to do it for yourself.

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