Cutting & Stitching

July 27, 2014

As you focus on the breath, try to see it as a continuous thread. Even when the out-breath stops, there’s still breath energy in the body. When the in-breath stops, there’s still breath energy in the body. So there’s something to connect them. And then you want to make your mindfulness and alertness connected as well. We usually have moments of attention and then they drop away. And if we’re not careful, the mind can slip off in all sorts of directions when one moment of attention is dropped. That’s what mindfulness is for, is to stitch these various moments together. You remember this is where you want to stay. So figure out some way to connect things. So your mind is with this continuous thread of the breath. Connecting from the breath. What it means to be present all the time, without gaps, without pauses. Even if the out-breath or in-breath pauses, there’s still breath energy there. You want to have that same quality of connectedness in the mind with your object of concentration. As for other things, you want to cut the connections. As soon as you notice a thought is coming up in the mind, cut. A little tendril of thought goes off, another action, cut it off, using whatever tools are going to work for you. This is one of the functions of discernment, knowing what to connect and what to cut. The cutting here is sometimes done with what they call the three characteristics. Think of how this is going to be in constant. Whatever you’re going to stitch together is not going to be worth it. Stressful? Not self. But you don’t have to use those terms. The terms themselves are not the wisdom or the discernment. It’s the seeing that this is not worth it. As the Buddha said, everything, every dhamma, is rooted in desire. And the reason we have a desire for something is because we think that the energy that goes into it is going to be worth it. There’s kind of a calculation that goes on in the mind. Sometimes it’s pretty quick. Other times it’s more laborious or drawn out. But it’s there all the time. We want something so we can feed on it. What you have to do is any way of thinking that helps you see that these other things are not worth feeding on. They’re not worth the energy that goes into cooking them up. Because it does take quite a lot of energy for the mind to create a thought world. And then to maintain it. So you might as well put that energy into something useful, put it into the path, rather than into things that wander off into the underbrush. So whether it’s thinking about how painful that world is going to be, or just how inconstant, impermanent, or how it’s just really not worth it. It’s not worth hanging onto. We go around gathering up things, gathering up things in life. And you have to ask yourself, is it something you want to carry around? The image they have in Thailand is the old woman who has a bale of straw. She figures out that someday, sometime, she’s going to need that bale of straw. So wherever she goes, she carries her bale of straw. She won’t put it down. Because you never know. Of course, there are many other things in life that are much better than that. And if you’re not weighing yourself down with the straw, you can walk straight and see things more clearly. But look at yourself. What are the bales of straw that you are carrying around? See if you can cut through the lines that hold them on your back. Cut through the cords. Cut through the connections. Whatever way you have of seeing that this is not worth it, that’s how you let go. Now, it’s important that you begin to see how things that you think are automatically connected are not. There’s an element of your mental glue that puts them together. A feeling comes up, and then you glue a story to it. And then once the story is glued to it, you glue more feelings on. And then you decide whether you like or don’t like the story, and you glue that on top of that as well. And what you do is you end up with this big sticky mess. An important part of the practice is seeing that these things are separate moments. They’re separate thought worlds, separate qualities. They don’t have to be glued together. A thought comes, and then there’s the feeling. Well, you don’t have to connect the feeling with a thought. The feeling will naturally arise. But if you see them as separate things, they can fall away separately. They don’t carry any weight. They don’t carry any poison. By deciding that you like or don’t like something, you can see that as a separate thought and then just let it drop. Get back to your meditation. If you’re going to glue anything together, try to glue your mind together with the breath. This kind of attachment the Buddha didn’t criticize. It’s learning how to be selective what you stitch together, what you cut. Because these are all different thought worlds, but they have different rewards, different drawbacks. The concentration gets better. It brings lots of rewards, which is why we work on it. All the things that need to go into a thought world are right here. And all the skills. There’s the skill of, one, giving rise to the focus on the breath, and then two, the skill of maintaining it, and the skill of adjusting it. And then there’s the skill of evaluating your adjustments. All these things help to tie things together and make it a lot more interesting to be here. Because you realize you’re right at the right spot to see the processes of the mind and to see them as processes. So the other ways you have of gluing things together in narratives, this story in which this incident led to that one and that one led to this one and this is what I’m miserable right now, or whatever. You just see them. They’re processes. You don’t have to identify with the characters in the story. You don’t have to praise or criticize the author of the story. You just see them. If this were a movie, we wouldn’t want to pay for it, to watch it. And yet we look at these repeats over and over and over again. So try to see it in a way that you can cut off any interest. You can see this happening because you’ve created this other world of awareness, the world of the concentration centered in the breath, with your awareness filling the whole body. So you’re less likely to get knocked off balance by whatever comes up. This you want to stitch together because it gives you so many insights into all the other thought worlds you can create. So as you practice, know what to stitch together and know what to cut. Get your sense of values in line with your desires. What are your desires for true happiness? Because we have so many scattered values, things that we see as important here or over there. You have to look at them. Sometimes they work together, and other times they work at cross purposes. You want to sort things out in your mind. What’s really important to you? Focus on that. As for other things, pick them up, put them down as necessary. But don’t pick up anything that’s going to get in the way of your genuine values, your genuine wish for true happiness. Because that’s the one thought world, the one desire, that really does pay off if you Stick with it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140727_Cutting_&_Stitching.mp3>