Tricks of the Trade

November 30, 2014

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths so that if the breath energy in the body is too low right now, you can raise the level so the body feels nourished. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels just right—not too exciting, not too lethargic—whatever feels best for the body right now. Once you’ve found a rhythm that feels good, make a survey of the body. Start with the fingers. Is there any tension in your fingers? If there is, relax it. Go to the palms of your hands, the backs of your hands. How about them? Any tension there? Relax it. Work your way up the arms. All the way to the shoulders and the neck. Then start at the toes. Work your way up the feet, the legs, through the hips, up the spine, to the neck, and into the skull. You can take your time with this, especially if you find there’s tension in any particular part of the body. When you’re doing the arms, compare your hands. Your elbows, upper arms, whichever side seems to have more tension, allow that side to relax. The same with the legs, the torso, and into your head. You’re trying to create a good place to stay right here in the present moment and to reclaim the breath energy in the body for skillful states of mind. You’re changing the balance of power inside. Because all too often when an unskillful state of mind comes in, it’s going to commandeer your breath, hijack your breath, and create pressure in different parts of the body. Pressure in your head, pressure in your torso, anywhere at all where it feels really unpleasant. And then it will say, “Okay, if you don’t give in to me, this pressure is just going to build, build, build.” And you can make it build. It becomes an unconscious reaction. But if you decide you really don’t want to give in to that mental state, you can release the tension. Going down the arms, out the palms of the hands, going down the feet, out to the soles of the feet, and out into the air. And you realize that that thread of growing tension doesn’t have to be believed. You have to learn how to see through the tricks of your defilements. Remember, they’re like politicians. They can make threats, they can make empty promises. All the tricks that politicians can do, your defilements can do. There’s a book in Thailand, Samko, which literally means “the three kingdoms.” It’s actually a translation of an old Chinese novel about all the political intrigue during a period when the empire in China had fallen apart. The book is almost a catalog of all the tricks that politicians can play. Someone once told me, “If you want to understand Thai politics, read this novel. This is where people get their tricks, releasing false rumors, making false threats.” A lot of these tricks apply to the mind. But when you have the breath on your side, you’re in a much better position to see through the tricks and have the sense of inner refreshment that allows you to not side with your defilements. One thing that they like to do is to threaten that, “If you don’t give in to me now, it’s just going to get stronger and stronger, and eventually you’re going to explode.” We tend to have that belief, particularly about lust. This is something that we’ve been using against ourselves for a long, long time. You have to remember all the tricks that the defilements play on you. You taught them at one point or another because you were on their side. Now that you’ve taken the other side, you have to remember, “Okay, I taught them this trick. Let’s see if we can see through it.” In the sense that it’s going to be this rising wave that’s going to break at some point. That’s just our perception. You’ve stitched together certain feelings in the body. In your memory of what the lust was like last week, in your memory of what it was like the week before, you can recreate that memory so it seems like it’s a rising wave. But you can take that apart, shred those perceptions. Remember, each time it comes, it’s the same old feeling, and it’ll go away for a while. And the fact that it’s going to come back, you have to learn how to live with that. Just remind yourself you’re going to get a chance to see this again and again. So instead of feeling threatened by it, say, “This is an opportunity to try different techniques to see what’s going to work.” Like with lust, sometimes thinking about the different parts of the body, what’s inside your body, is enough. Other times, that doesn’t work. And again, the defilements say, “See? We’ve beat that technique.” Well, maybe you need something else. Maybe the issue today is not the same as it was yesterday. Maybe the particular trigger that triggered your lust today is not the same as it was, say, last week. So you’ve got to cast it around. Maybe it’s not just looking at what the body looks like, but the story you’ve built around it, the narrative that you’ve built around it, or the idea that lust is attractive. It’s good to reflect many times on all the horrible things that people do under the power of lust, and the stupid things they do under the power of lust. Anything to help you see that the lust itself is nothing really attractive. We tend to associate it with things that we find attractive, but the lust itself is nothing attractive at all. And then there are the fantasies that have their little hooks. Well, try to take those hooks apart. Again, it’s a lot easier when the breath is calm throughout the body, because part of the power of lust is the tension that builds up, sometimes in the backs of your hands, all kinds of different places that you might not have expected. See if you can help release it and be on the lookout for the next time it’s going to come. Because what happens often is that there’ll be a little blip of lust or anger or whatever the unskillful emotion is going to be in the course of the day, and there’s a little agreement that’s made, “Okay, we’re going to give in to this tonight. And it’ll happen again a couple times, at random times throughout the day.” And then when it presents itself in full form, it’s going to say, “Look, it’s already been decided you’ve got to give in. And you have to remember, okay, you didn’t sign any papers. There are no contracts with your defilements. And they don’t recognize contracts. So why should you recognize a contract with them? Because they’re not going to undecide that.” Or they may say, “You’re going to give in. At some point, anyhow, so why don’t you give in now and get it over with?” And you say, “Well, I don’t know about that other point, but right now, I’m responsible for right now, and I’m not going to give in.” And you find that this sense of the threatening defilement that threatens to get stronger and stronger, it just doesn’t. It will weaken. It comes and it goes. And if you can remember, again, that you trained the defilements with these techniques. Sometimes you used them as a little child against your parents or against your friends. Or against your enemies, to strengthen that particular defilement. There’s nothing so clever about the defilements, nothing so powerful about the defilements, that you can’t figure out a way past them. You’ve got to have that confidence. Because, after all, you taught them their techniques. So you should be able to learn to see through them. And having experience working with the breath, it helps to diffuse a lot of the power, the physical side of their power. So you don’t feel quite so oppressed. Because many times it’s just when you’re feeling harassed or tired or irritable that these things come in. So you use the breath to soothe the mind. You use the breath to soothe the body. And when it’s in a much better mood, it’s a lot more likely to see through things. Not able to see through them, it’s a lot more likely to be able to stand up and say, “I can sit here. You can display as much as you want, but I’m not going to give in.” And the defilement, as with any mental construct, is going to have to wear out after a while. You haven’t totally defeated it, but at least you’ve withstood it for the time being. And that’s a kind of victory, as you get more and more familiar with how you can withstand these things. There’s a sense of strength that comes, one, simply from the fact, “Okay, I was able to see it through.” You wake up the next morning and remind yourself, “Okay, I was able to see it through last night. I feel really good about that.” Remind yourself of that. Take note of that. So it will strengthen your resolve not to give in to a quick, immediate pleasure that’s going to have long-term bad consequences. So your defilements have their politics, they have their stratagems, they have their tricks of the trade. But you, as a meditator, can have a few tricks as well. Make it your sport. This is one case where eventually winning really does carry something of value. You can win out over other people at times, but sometimes that creates karma, bad kind of karma, and it comes back at you. But beating your defilements, outwitting them, cheating them, is all okay. This is all for the clarity of your mind. You want to reclaim the goodness of your mind. You want to reclaim your body and your mind for the sake of what’s good and worthwhile.

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