Training in Maturity

December 21, 2014

When you try to settle down with the breath, you want to approach it in a friendly way. You’re not going to squeeze the mind into concentration, because that puts a squeeze on the body as well. And then it becomes uncomfortable and the mind looks for another place to stay. So are you going to be friendly with the breath? We experiment. Pose questions. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel really good right now?” And if the body doesn’t seem to respond, then you can nudge things a little bit. Try longer breathing for a while, shorter breathing for a while, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Try to keep track of the breath. When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fugong, he would say, “Keep a hold of the breath.” Immediately my mind had an image of my hand catching onto something, and that caused me to squeeze the breath. It became very uncomfortable, very unpleasant to stay. One day I had to figure out, “Okay, well, just let the breath do its own thing. I just have to watch it.” And it seemed much easier to stay. So, being a Westerner, I criticized him. I said, “Why do you say to catch the breath when you’re trying to catch it? Just squeeze it.” He laughed and said, “That’s not what he meant by catch.” Catch, he said, means just keeping track of it and sticking with it consistently to see what it wants. In other words, to see what’s good for the body, what feels right. Because as you’re meditating here, you want to have a sense of well-being with the breath. This concentration is a matter of giving the mind something that it likes, otherwise it’s not going to stay. So find some nice breath. And the breath is good for you because actually it is the energy that keeps the body and the mind together, and it animates the body. So it’s something you want to be on good terms with anyhow, even if you’re not formally meditating. So it’s good to get to know it. Think of the meditation not so much as forcing the mind into it, but more as an exploration. You want to learn things about the body, learn things about the mind. And the breath is a good place to focus for this because it’s where the body and the mind meet. And when they’re on friendly terms, the body functions well. When the body functions well, the mind finds it a lot easier to stay here. You have a lot of voices in your mind commenting on things as they’re going along. So look for the useful voices, the ones that help you to stay here. If things don’t seem to be working out, offer suggestions. The useless voices are the ones who say, “This is not going to work. I’m a miserable failure. I’ve been trying this for five minutes and getting nowhere. Or trying this for five years and getting nowhere.” Put those voices aside because they’ve never really helped you. You want the helpful voices. In fact, this is one way of dealing with the voices of doubt and uncertainty, is asking yourself, “If you have something useful to offer, I’ll be willing to listen to it. If not, I’m not going to listen.” Because sometimes the voice of doubt is actually more a voice of wondering. And sometimes wondering is good, and sometimes it’s not. If you sit here wondering, “What’s Nirvana like?” That’s not going to help right now. If you wonder about what would be a good way to get on better terms with the breath, that’s a helpful wondering. You have to learn how to be mature in how you deal with your desires, how you deal with your doubts, how you deal with your conviction or lack of conviction. It’s a quality that’s hard for one person to teach another, but it’s something we can develop over time if we’re observant and if we have a consistency of motivation—in other words, realizing that this is an important task, this is an important skill to develop. The mind needs to be trained. And we live in a culture that doesn’t give much good training to the mind. It teaches us to be expecting things instantly. In other words, we don’t learn patience, we don’t learn endurance. It rewards certain kinds of ingenuity, but the kind of ingenuity that helps you inside is something that they just leave for you to discover on your own. Fortunately, we have the skill that was handed down by the Buddha. It’s been carried on through many generations. This is how you train your mind. This is how you get your mind so you can rely on it. First, by teaching it to stay with one thing. That requires mindfulness, in other words, remembering to stay with one thing, alertness, noticing what you’re doing and noticing the results you’re getting. If you’re slipping away, you notice that, and then you use ardency to bring yourself back. Ardency is a quality that gives oomph to the practice. But it’s not just oomph, it’s a quality that brings wisdom as well. Because you can be mindful about all kinds of things, you can be alert to all kinds of things, but ardency is what reminds you that this is what you should be mindful of, this is what you should be alert to, because you want to gain good results from the practice, you want to gain good results from these teachings, your opportunity to sit here and meditate. You don’t want this time to go to waste. That’s the wisdom part. You can listen to the Buddha’s teachings, you can read them, you can become an expert in all the languages that Buddhism has been taught in. But if you’re not really ardent in trying to train your mind, you don’t understand anything in what the Buddha has to say. It’s that realization that, “Okay, this is really going to make a difference in my life, to be able to put my mind on one object and to stay there, and to learn how not to listen to the destructive voices inside or outside, to learn how to listen to the encouraging ones, to learn how to listen to the discerning ones.” Because the encouragement and the discernment have to go together. There are basically two kinds of truths in life. There are what could be called the truths of the observer, things that are just true or false regardless of whether you’re interested in them or not, whether you have any desires around them or not. In fact, in those areas, the less you desire things to be a certain way, the more you’re actually going to be able to learn, like observing how the stars move, observing chemical reactions, that kind of thing. But then there are also truths of the will, things that become true only if you want them to be true. If you want to learn to be a good carpenter, it’s required for you to become that good carpenter. If you don’t have the desire, it’s not going to happen on its own. And that knowledge about the stars, the knowledge about the chemicals, if you want something out of it, then you can put it to use. So these truths of the observer and truths of the will are not totally distinct. Meditation is a combination of the two, on the one hand, and on the other, there are certain facts about the body that you’ve got to learn how to accept, certain facts about the mind you’ve got to learn how to accept, like those chants we had just now, the reflection on aging, illness, and death. Those are truths of the observer. Reflection on separation is a truth of the observer. Reflection on karma is a truth of the observer. Then we had that phrase, “May I be happy.” That’s a truth of the will. Now you have to learn how to use these truths of the observer wisely. You have to push against them a bit. That’s what the truths of the will are about. You have to push things, but you have to learn how to push them skillfully. And that’s where the maturity comes in. So as you’re sitting here finding yourself discouraged, you’ve got to give yourself a pep talk. But just pep talks on their own are not enough. An important skill to learn how to be able to encourage yourself in a process and a skill is going to take time. When I was in Thailand, when we sharpened our knives, we just had a big machete and we had a big stone, and that was it. No knife sharpeners, nothing. You could just zip, zip, zip, and have your knife sharpened. It took time. And you had to be very patient. Just stick with it, stick with it, stick with it, and make sure the pressure stayed even. If you’re too impatient, you ruin the blade. Or you get a blade that’s sharp in some parts and not in others. So you have to learn how to train your mind so that it’s willing to sit there for quite a long time, just doing things constantly, learning how to give yourself encouragement. Now the blade is half sharp, now it’s two-thirds sharp, now it’s three-quarters sharp. We’re getting someplace. And that ability to put away the thoughts in the mind that get impatient, that complain, whatever, you just learn how to ignore them. They’ve done studies, and people with manual skills tend to be more mature than people who don’t have manual skills. Not the kind of study where they have numbers, but they just notice societies where people have manual skills. They tend to be a lot more solid and stable. People learn how to live together better. So if you have a manual skill, think back on times when you got discouraged and now you’re able to pick yourself up. Now you’re able to keep at things. Sometimes you do run into limits in your talents, limits in your abilities, but you learn how to work around them. Don’t just let them be a wall. So as you’re working with the breath, you have to learn how to figure out which voices inside you should listen to and which ones you shouldn’t. Because there is going to be some chatter going on in the mind as you get the mind to settle down with the breath. That’s what the factors of the first jhana are all about, direct thought and evaluation. You focus on the breath and then you evaluate how you’re doing it. You evaluate how the breath is going, you evaluate your focus. When things are not going well, try to figure out what would be better. Should I focus someplace else? Should I change the way I breathe? Am I being too eager to look at what’s going to happen next or trying to push things in a certain direction? How about if I just let things happen? Sometimes being proactive means stepping back, letting things take their own course for a while to see what they do when they’re left to their own course. You don’t just push, push, push all the time. And over time, you get a second sense of what’s going to work, what’s not going to work. But sometimes you contrast, and sometimes you’ve got to keep training that. It’s an ongoing process. So approach this as a skill. Remember that everybody in your mind is on board with a skill. So you’ve got to learn how to ferret out which voices you’re going to listen to and which ones you’re not going to listen to. And when you’re saying ridiculous things, you sometimes have to squeeze them out. Other times you have to say, “If I could try squeezing out those voices, it’s going to squeeze the breath and I’m going to lose touch with the breath.” So the voices can be there in the background. You just learn how not to listen to them. You don’t deny that they’re there. It’s the same as when you’re afraid of something. If you deny the fact that you’re afraid, you’re going to do something stupid. If you admit, “Okay, there’s fear here, but I’ve got to deal with this situation wisely, so I’m just not going to listen to what the fearful voices have to say, but I am going to be careful. I am going to be observant.” Over time, you learn how to trust yourself more. You gain the maturity that takes control of the mind. Because this is a lot of what the meditation is for, teaching you maturity. It’s a task that takes time. The goal is large. So how do you break things down into small pieces so you can move step by step by step? How do you keep yourself encouraged when the mind is not as easy to observe, say, as a sharpened knife? You look at a knife, you can tell whether it’s sharp or not. You look at your mind and say, “Well, where do we go from here?” It doesn’t have a shape. It doesn’t have an appearance. But you take confidence in the fact that if you work on more concentration, it’s going to be helpful. If you work on more mindfulness, it’s going to be helpful. Stick with the causes. And if you feel that you’re lost, always go back to the beginning. Because sometimes the really simple steps are the ones that matter the most. They come first because you have to do them really, really well. It’s not that they’re kindergarten steps and then you move on to something else. The ability to stay focused with just the right amount of pressure on the mind so that it stays with the breath but not so much that things get constricted. You keep coming back to that. And you find that you keep coming back a lot. Don’t get discouraged about that. You just want to learn this really, really well. And if it turns out that you lose track of what you’re doing, come back. Say, “Okay, there’s something more to be learned here.” And as you stick with it, you gain the kind of maturity that’s an important part of training the mind.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/141221_Training_in_Maturity.mp3>