Protecting the Flame

January 17, 2015

When you focus on the breath, you’re trying to bring all your awareness to the feeling of the breath in the body. Now, where is your awareness? A lot of us tend to think that the awareness is up in the head. It’s like a bird perched on your shoulders, looking through your eyes. But if you take a survey, you begin to realize that there is awareness all through the body. There’s awareness in your toes. There’s awareness in your fingers. It’s all around. It’s something that we tend to block out as we focus on other things. Especially when we’re focusing on our visual awareness, we tend to block out our awareness of the body. And in a culture where people are spending a lot of time staring at screens, they become more and more disembodied. So try to re-embody yourself. Think of the breath coming in and there’s an energy going through the body that helps you identify the fact that there is a body here right now. How do you know you’ve got legs? Well, there’s a certain feeling. How do you know you have arms? There’s a certain feeling where the arms are. That feeling has a breath aspect. In other words, there’s an energy to it all throughout the body. So try to get your awareness focused on that. And see if you can keep it there. And Chan Fung used to say there are three stages to the meditation. One is doing it, and then the next one is maintaining it. And the maintaining it takes a lot of time and a lot of skill. Think of it as trying to start a fire. There’s a term for concentration in Pali, jhana, which means absorption, steady concentration. And it’s related to a verb, “to burn.” Pali has lots of different verbs for burning, and the one that’s relevant here, jhanati, is one that’s used to describe the burning of a flame of an oil lamp. It’s a steady flame, the kind of flame by which you can read. You try to read a book, say, by the flame of a fire in your fireplace, and you start getting headaches because everything is flashing and bright and dark and bright and dark. But the flame of an oil lamp is steady. And that’s the kind of quality you’re trying to develop in your awareness. You want to be steadily here with the breath. In the beginning, it’s like starting any kind of fire. You have a little tiny flame, and you have to protect it. It’s like starting a fire out in a windy area. You have to cup your hands around it and be very careful not to let it go out. Now, the winds here are too kind. There are winds from outside and there are winds from inside. The winds from outside are disturbing noises, lots and lots of people moving around and doing things. Here we don’t have much of that. Things are quiet. We have a number of people sitting here in the hall, but they’re not that many, and everybody’s sitting quietly. So unless somebody’s breathing very heavily or snoring in the back of the room, there’s not much in terms of outside disturbance. The big winds right now are things coming up in your own mind. Because one of the first things you learn about the mind as you try to focus it on one object is that it’s many minds. There’s the intention to stay here, but then there’s a lot of other chatter going on as well. And sometimes the other voices begin to take over, making you doubt what you’re doing or saying that you’ve got other things you’ve got to think about. You think, “Here’s a whole hour. Why not think about them?” You have to learn how not to pay attention to those voices. Some voices will be helpful with the meditation, and others will be kind of helpers who are actually causing more trouble than help. So you have to sort that out for a while, too. It takes a while to get used to things inside. It’s like we have multiple personalities, but it’s not the kind of multiple personalities that would send you off to an insane asylum. That’s where the personalities act as if they don’t know one another, and they’re very separate. Here there’s more of a discussion, and what you’re trying to do is get the discussion straightened out a bit. Sometimes they’re just random voices, and you can brush them aside, pay them no attention, and they go away. Other times they have their reasons, which they will put forth for you, in which case you have to look at them with their reasons until you see that there’s really nothing much there, or at the very least that there’s no reason to think about these things right now. This is why the ajahns make a distinction between times when you have to use your concentration to give rise to discernment and other times when you use your discernment to give rise to concentration. In other words, discerning, giving rise to concentration, is reminding yourself of why you want to be here, why you want to train the mind, and why you don’t want to devote this time to something else. The conversations there don’t have to be long. Sometimes in the very beginning you’ve got to sort things out very carefully because the voices that want you to do something else have been holding power for a long time, and they’re not about to give it up very easily. But with time you begin to see where their weak points are. Those reflections we had just now can help a lot. Realizing that the things we normally depend on for happiness, the things that we normally loom large in our lives, require a lot of effort, and then they don’t give much back in return. If you think of all the effort that goes into keeping this body going, going, going, what happens? Well, it gets sick. And if you live long enough, you find that it gets old. When it gets old, it starts doing things it never did before. It’s giving you pains here, pains there, things where it used to be that the body could repair itself and now it’s suddenly decided that it’s had enough of that. Look at things outside. There are some things you can accomplish and they just get washed right away. And even if they don’t get washed away during your lifetime, you’re going to have to leave them. What are you going to take with you when you go? Well, you’ve got this state of mind. And if you’ve been allowing the mind to wander around picking up all kinds of bad habits, that’s going to be taking the bad habits in its baggage when you go. So here’s some time to clean out the baggage. Or if you think about dealing with a job you’re facing, you can’t tell 100 percent what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know that you’ll need more mindfulness and more alertness to deal with whatever surprises the future has in store. Here’s a good time to meditate. This is just an example of how you might sort things out and settle down. Once you’ve settled down a little bit, it’s not much in the beginning, just usually a narrow area of attention. Or if you’ve chosen to focus on the breath, try to protect it. Nothing else that comes up is relevant right now, so let it go, let it go. Eventually you’ll have to deal with these things. I keep reading people complaining about, “What is this with Buddhist meditation? If you let go, let go, let go of everything, you don’t solve any problems.” That’s not the case. You’re learning some basic skills and you’re trying to clear the decks. Create a space in which you can deal with issues that go deeper in the mind. But first you need the tools to create this state of mind. As the Buddha said, you don’t see things really clearly in the mind until you’ve gotten into this state of jhana, where you’ve got a steady awareness, still, with a sense of well-being. This is why we work with the breath energies in the body to make them comfortable, so you feel like you belong here, it feels good to be here, and you’re not hungry. If you’re hungry, whatever experiments you conduct in the mind, whatever questions you do to probe things in the mind, the hunger is going to get in the way. It’s like trying to learn about monkeys. You’ve got the monkeys and you’ve been given a budget to provide bananas for the monkeys, but it turns out the researchers don’t have any food. What happens is the researchers eat the bananas. Then the monkeys get all crazy, because they have nothing to eat. So you’ve got to feed the researchers as well. Then the monkeys get to eat the bananas, and then you can study the monkeys. So right now we’re putting the mind in a state where its awareness is steady and still, and you try to protect that. You give yourself the possibility of testing the Buddhist teachings. Are they really true? Do they really put an end to suffering? When you train the mind, what’s involved? How do you create suffering for yourself? How do you watch that without getting involved in the suffering? These are skills you have to master. The basic skill, though, is this steady awareness. And as things settle down, some of the voices that helped you in the beginning to get settled down become superfluous. Because at first you have to be asking questions about the breath, asking questions about the mind, trying to adjust things, polish things, take them apart, put them back together again, until things fit nice and snugly here in the present moment. Then you can stop all that extra chatter and just sort of be here. That gets you closer and closer to the state of mind where the Buddha says your equanimity is pure, your mindfulness is pure. And then you can observe things inside steadily. Because the steadiness is what makes all the difference in the world. The things you’re going to be learning about are things you’ve been seeing in bits and snatches up to the present, but you haven’t seen the connections. And you tend to have a bias towards some of the things the mind is saying and against other things. But when you bring the mind to that state of still, steadiness, and a sense of well-being, the mind is no longer leaning to those different biases. Then you can start examining things for what they are. When something arises in the mind and you go after it, is it helpful? Is it not? That’s going to be an element of stress, but is the stress worth it or not? In some cases, the answer is yes. In others, a lot of them, it’s no. You begin to see the habits that the mind has been engaging in, simply because they’re habits. They’re familiar ways of doing things. They’re familiar ways of thinking. But having this steady, focused gaze, this steady flame of mindfulness, this steady flame in the mind, helps you to see them from a different perspective. You see, there’s a lot of stress that you’re piling onto things, and it’s really not necessary. Why continue it? This is how the concentration gives you a good basis for further discernment. So work on this steady flame. Cup your hands around it in case there’s a wind. Protect it. Then when the fire takes, it’ll fill your whole body. Fill your awareness with the steadiness. And that’s when you can begin to see things for what they are. And use that awareness, use that knowledge, that vision of things for what they are, to free yourself from all the unnecessary burdens you’ve been placing on yourself and others. So try to be steadily here.

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