After a Busy Day

January 23, 2015

When you come to meditation at the end of a busy day, dealing with a lot of people, driving around, or exposed to the media one way or another, there’s a lot you’ve got to wash out. So clean things out of your system so you can settle down and have a clean place to stay. There are different ways you can do this. First, sweeping through the body every little square centimeter, every little cell being bathed with the breath, ventilated by the breath. If you’re using a meditation word to go along with the breath, you can think of every cell in the body saying, “Buddho, Buddho,” and allow that to wash through the system. The Buddha talks about metta as another way of clearing things out. He says it’s like a trumpet player. In those days they didn’t have a trumpet like we know. It was a conch shell. Blowing a conch shell and sending the sound out in all directions. So you can think of metta going out in all directions through your body, out to all the people you’ve dealt with. That’s calming things down and cleaning things out. The other way is to think about the various things that you could be going after, your thoughts could be going after, right now. And to use the Jhammabhuva’s image, having a stick. It’s like a monkey reaching out here, and you have a little stick to tap the monkey on the wrist. “Nope, don’t reach for that. Don’t reach for this.” Anything you might hold onto, say, that’s going to pass away. That’s inconstant. It’s stressful, not self. Why are you going for it? I ran across an interesting phrase today in a poem in the Theragatha, where a monk is talking about what he calls carcass pleasure. Any of the pleasures that are designed to be easeful to the body, sensual pleasures, carcass pleasures. You’re doing things just for the sake of your carcass. That’s a good term to wake yourself up. It’s a good way to remember where you’ve been looking for your pleasures. The important thing is that when you’re settling the mind down here, you really have to get it to settle down. You can’t just let it wander around as it likes. Some people meditate as if they were in a plane, just kind of gradually making their way down to the landing strip at the end of the hour. They have a few minutes of stillness at the end of the hour, and then the timer goes off. Lots of wasted hours. If you’ve meditated before, you know where your favorite spot is in the body. You know what kind of breathing you like. So once you’ve cleaned things out a little bit, see if you can settle there. If you haven’t meditated before, you can start at the middle of the chest. That usually is a sensitive spot. Notice how that part of the body feels as you breathe in, feels as you breathe out, and experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels nourishing, feels soothing in that part of the body. If you have trouble staying focused on the chest, you can stay focused right between the eyes, right above the eyes, the palate, the tip of the nose, any place where you do find it easy to stay. And you can notice and sense what kind of breathing feels good there. Because the breathing is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s that flow of energy through the body that allows the air to come in and out. And that flow of energy is connected with other flows of energy through the bloodstream, through the nerves, through all the muscles of the body. You might explore for a while to see how these things are connected. The important thing is that you’re here, here, here. You don’t go wandering off. The image the Buddha gives is of an elephant that’s brought in from the forest. They have to train it. But before they can train it, they have to get it used to just staying there with human beings. So they have to chain it up to a post. Of course, the elephant’s going to pull at the post. But at least it has a post. A lot of us, when we sit down to meditate, just wander. We have nothing to hold us down. So stay with the breath, and do what you can to make it pleasant with the breath. This is why they’d feed the elephant while it was staying at the post. It doesn’t have to worry about food. They’d play music to soothe it. So use the breath to soothe the mind. Use the breath to soothe the body. Get it used to being here. But be very strict with it about not going anyplace else. For the time being, that’s the rule you want to set up in your mind. You’re going to stay here and nowhere else. Because it’s only when you’re really here consistently that you can observe things well. If you say, “Well, I’ll just watch the mind wherever it’s going,” you get carried along with wherever it’s going. And sometimes it moves around. It’s like a boat on the water. There’s no anchor, and the boat can move, and you don’t really know. Is it moving because of the water? Is it moving because of your own movements in the boat? Or is it something outside pushing the water? You have nothing to compare it with. But if you’ve got this stake, you’ve got this post to tie the mind down. Make it the breath. And then everything else you can just cut off, cut off. Again, breathe through it. If you can locate where in the body there may be a pattern of tension that corresponds to that thought, or if you catch it going off after, little pleasures tomorrow, little pleasures today. The pleasures of yesterday, they’re gone. Where is the pleasure that you had, say, with yesterday’s meal? You’ve got the food someplace in your system, but otherwise the pleasure is gone. And as for tomorrow’s pleasures, you don’t really know if you’re going to live to see them. And many of them are, in that phrase, carcass pleasures. Is that where you want to go? Sometimes it’s old movies, things you’ve gone over again and again and again. You can ask yourself, “If you saw this movie being played on the TV, would you watch it? If it was at a movie theater, would you pay money?” No, it’s not really worth it. Yet there’s some sort of pleasure about chewing over old things like that. But then it’s nothing compared to the pleasure that can be attained when the mind settles down. So there are basically two ways of getting the mind to settle down in it. Clean out things from the day, either just using a concentration technique to get things really still, or using your discernment to teach yourself that you don’t want to wander out there. Eventually this all comes together. You’re going to be here with the breath, and you’re going to learn how to stay here contentedly. This means you have to observe it even more, with even more care, and be even more sensitive to what’s going on. How’s your posture? How is the breath affecting your posture? How is your posture affecting the breath? Are there pains in the body? Are those putting a limit on how you breathe? Can you think of the breath going through them? This way the mind can settle in and have a sense of belonging here. Then you try to keep it. There’ll be thoughts, “Well, okay, I’ve done this. What’s next?” You stay here and learn how to master the skill of staying with the breath and not listening to the thoughts that complain that it’s boring or anything. You’re getting yourself in the right position to watch your own mind. You may gain little insights right at the very beginning, but don’t let them pull you away. You’re here to develop your posture, i.e., the posture of the mind sitting fully in the body with the breath. Still but alert. Ajaan Khamdi, one of the masters of the forest tradition, said, “It’s like being a hunter. The hunter has to be very still so as not to scare the animals away, and very alert.” So you can hear any signs of the animal coming. And very patient, because you never know when it’s going to come. So you’re getting the mind in a state of readiness. This is one of the ways in which, as the Buddha said, you need both tranquility and insight to get the mind to settle down into a good, strong state of concentration. He calls right concentration jhana. It’s related to a verb, jhanati, which means to burn with a steady flame. Pali has lots of different words for burning. The burning of a timber fire is one kind of verb. Jhanati refers to an oil lamp, the flame of an oil lamp. It’s very steady. It’s so steady you can read by it. That’s precisely what you want with the mind. You want the mind to be steady, like this, so it can read what’s going on inside. But if you’re in too much of a hurry to take the lamp around and look at this and look at that, look at this over here, sometimes the flame goes out. So you’ve got to learn how to just tend to the flame, keep it going. And it turns out you don’t have to go very far. The things you want to understand, the things you want to see, will come up right here. After all, as the Buddha pointed out, the problem we’re approaching here is the problem of the unnecessary stress and suffering that the mind creates for itself. And where does it create it? It creates it right here. Where does it do it? It creates it right now. It’s in these very subtle movements of the mind that it happens. So you’ve got the light at the right spot. Just learn how to tend to it. And things will come up in the course of the meditation. Some things you’ll find that if you try to understand them, the flame wobbles. You’ve got to get back and make sure the flame is steady. But after a while, you’ll be able to stay with that steady flame, and things will come up and you’ll see them clearly. You’ll understand the movements of the mind, your intentions in particular, because those are the things that shape your life, shape the state of your mind. You’ll see perceptions coming up. These have an enormous impact on the way you experience things. In other words, the labels and images by which you identify things. Say, “This is this, and that’s that.” And you can begin to question them, because you see them not as a label that corresponds to something outside, but you see them as a label that the mind has created. And it comes from a certain attitude in the mind, and it creates other attitudes in the mind. You’re seeing it as part of an internal causal process. That’s what you’re looking for, is to see how things arise and pass away in the mind from causes. So you can deal with the causes and not just the effects. It’s like going into a house where there’s a lot of smoke. You go through the house until you find the flame that’s causing the smoke, and you put out the flame. If you try to go around catching all the smoke, you can catch it for days and days and days and not come to the end of it if the flame is still burning. So instead of trying to catch the smoke or obliterate the smoke, you try to put out the fire. It’s the same with the mind. If a particular perception is causing unnecessary stress in the mind, you trace it back. Where does this perception come from? Again, at the very beginning, your concentration will not be on this. You get little glimpses here and there. So your main job is to take care of this flame, the flame that’s steady, not the flame that’s causing smoke. Learn how to attend to this. See this as a skill that you want to master. At the very least, the mind gets a place where it can settle down and regain its strength. In other words, you use stillness and you use insight to get the mind to more stillness so it gets better insights. Keep reinvesting that stillness, staying right here, because this is where all the action is.

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