Go Climb a Mountain

January 25, 2015

One of the advantages of taking the breath as your topic of meditation is that it gives you a place to get out of the mind. Sometimes there are a lot of discussions going on inside of the mind, and they’re not just polite roundtables. People are throwing things and getting all upset, punching one another. In other words, it’s not a discussion, it’s a fight. You need a place to get out of the fight. So here’s the breath. It comes in, it goes out. It’s a physical phenomenon. It doesn’t have much to say. It doesn’t have many opinions. And it gives you a place to step back. We need this place to step back. Because when you’re in the midst of the fray, you forget everything. Mindfulness goes out the window. You can be very aware of what you’re doing, but you lack mindfulness. Mindfulness is the quality of keeping something in mind, particularly right mindfulness, which is keeping in mind what you need to do, how to look at the situation so you know what to do with it so you don’t have to suffer. When the Buddha’s talking about different states of mind, different feelings, different aspects of the body, it’s not just your taking note of what’s there. That’s the alertness part. Then there’s the ardency part, which is to figure out, “What do I do with this?” If you can label a thought as a hindrance or label it as a potential factor for awakening, then you know it’s something either to be abandoned or something to be developed. There’s a duty there. Mindfulness helps us remember the duties. Because when you’re in the midst of the fray, you forget your duties. You just do whatever you feel like, and then you are miserable. Then you want to get out as quickly as possible, but you don’t have any way out because you’re not following the way out, which is to, one, focus on the breath, and then, two, remember what needs to be done here, and then do what needs to be done. Sometimes this is not easy. Sometimes the thoughts and emotions that are driving us crazy also have a big hook. There’s something about them we like, and you’re feeling sorry for them. That’s a peculiar pleasure in feeling sorry for yourself, because it makes you crazy, it makes you miserable, but at the same time you enjoy it. And the more miserable you are, the more you see you have proof for why you should feel sorry for yourself. And you get into a downward spiral. This is where you need the patience to do the work that’s required to put yourself or yourself out. Because even sometimes just getting into the breath requires work. I know a monk who was living in Thailand. He was living alone. His meditation was going really poorly, and he said what he would do would be to go climb a mountain. This is what you have to do when you’re alone. Who can you run away from? You’re trying to run away from yourself. Where do you go? Well, you climb a mountain. And one, it’s good physical exercise, because sometimes wearing the body out makes you see which thoughts are extraneous. It’s like taking a trip and realizing, “I’ve got this in my luggage and that in my luggage. I’ve got to throw this out, otherwise I won’t be able to complete the trip.” And it gives you a different perspective on things. Remember, standing on a mountain, you can see a lot more than you can see when you’re down in the valley. But it requires work. You have to be willing to put in some effort. And that’s what patience is, finding the position of strength inside you, but then doing the work to create that position of strength. You’re willing to put up with the work rather than putting up with being miserable forever. So it has to be part of you at all times. It’s alert to the fact that if something unskillful is going on in the mind, you’ve got to pull yourself out. No matter how alluring it may be, or if there’s a particular thought that’s driving you crazy and you’re 100 percent convinced that it’s true, you have to ask yourself, “Maybe part of this is false. Which part? Maybe I can’t see it. Well, let’s do what needs to be done to get out.” That’s what mindfulness is for. It gives you a hook so you can get out rather than being hooked by the pleasure of the miserable mind state. So as you’re focusing on the breath, you’re climbing the mountain. It takes a while to be willing to focus on the breath to stay there. But you’ve got to ask yourself, “Have you suffered enough? How much more suffering do you want?” Remember the Buddhist principle on the self as a governing principle. You come to the practice because you see that you’re causing yourself suffering, and this is the way out. If you were to give up on the practice, what would you have? You’d be back to where you were before, and probably even worse, because then you’d be regretting the fact that you’d left it. So real patience requires a certain amount of wisdom. The wisdom to see that there are things that are making you miserable, and it’s because of certain things that you like or certain things you believe are true, and you’ve got to learn how to wean yourself off of those ideas and do the work to climb the mountain, stick with this breath, stick with that breath. It may not seem like much, but then you realize that as long as I’m breathing, I might as well breathe in a comfortable way. And then you start exploring what it means to breathe in a comfortable way. What kind of concept of the breath helps you feel that there’s a breath energy throughout the body? What kind of concepts help you make that energy more nourishing, soothing, healing, whatever the body needs right now? Bit by bit by bit, you’re walking up the mountain. Then finally you get to a place where you realize, “Okay, I’ve got a nice comfortable place to stay here. Let’s look back at that thought that was driving me crazy.” And you’re looking with new eyes and with a certain amount of skepticism. I once commented to someone I knew that Jon Fung was an extremely skeptical sort of person. He was very surprised. He thought that meditation masters should all be loving and trusting. And that wasn’t my experience at all. He was very skeptical of people, but it’s because he’d learned how to be skeptical of his own defilements. And if he hadn’t been skeptical of his own defilements, he probably wouldn’t have lasted. And so his willingness to trust you was something that would have to take time and have to be proven. So here you are with a miserable thought. It’s proven itself that it’s making you miserable. What you have to do is learn to figure out, “Okay, what is it that’s making me miserable? What is it that attracts you to the thought? Why do you keep coming back?” It’s like a dog that finds a dead animal and then goes and buries it for a while. Then comes back after it’s been properly aged, digs it back up again, rolls around in it, and buries it again. Do you want your mind to be like that? Or do you want to see that there’s nothing much of real value here? Maybe I’d be better off just breathing. And finding this position of strength inside. Once you’ve got this, even though the problem may not be solved, at least you’ve got a place to focus your attention and you’ve got a source of strength. Because this is what enables patience to happen. This is what enables you to be more enduring. It’s not that you just grit your teeth against something that’s difficult or something you can’t get rid of right away. But it’s that you learn where your strength is so you don’t have to be totally immersed in the suffering that comes from that particular thought. In other words, you make it easier for yourself to endure because you realize that not everything right now is unendurable. There’s something here that you can actually draw some strength from. But it does require you to put in an investment—the willingness to pull out, the willingness to work on the breath, the willingness to remember what’s the Buddha taught, and to see it as your friend rather than as an imposition. After all, the Buddha shuns the different tasks he lays down, not because he’s a taskmaster, but because he sees that these are the things you’ve got to do if you want to be happy. If you want to get beyond suffering, there are certain things you’ve just got to do, regardless of whether you like them or not. And the impetus for following them on the days when you don’t like the duties is to remind yourself, “Well, the suffering that I’m suffering from right now is a lot worse than the work that’s required for the practice.” So bring a little patience, bring some wisdom to your patience. Climb the mountain inside. Get up out above the fog and see clearly, “Oh, this is a lot worse than the work that I’ve been suffering from,” and remember what the Buddha said. That’s what all the different categories of body, feeling, mind state, and mental qualities are all about. It’s to figure out where you fit right now in that field and what are the duties that go with it. Once you’ve been able to identify that this is the kind of thought, this is the kind of mind state, what does the Buddha recommend that you do? Why don’t you give it a try? He went to all that work to find the path to true happiness. Why don’t you give this path a try?

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