Downsize Inside

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When you focus on the breath, it’s good to experiment with different centers in the body. John Lee lists a few. Tip of the nose, middle of the forehead, top of the head, middle of the head, the palate, the throat, the end of your breastbone, down the spot just above the navel. And those are the main points. There are other points you can focus on as well. And you’ll notice that the quality of the concentration differs from point to point. And it’s good to find one point, though, that’s your home, the one that you carry around with you as you go through the day. Because the mind needs to be centered. It runs out after things so much. And as Lumpu Dunga once said, it’s the mind running out that causes a lot of stress and suffering. So try to keep it inside. In other words, you know what’s going on outside, but you have a sense of being centered in your body. That’s your position of strength. Don’t leave your position of strength. You know the image from the Canon. The quail goes away from his ancestral territory, and the hawk gets him. He’s being carried off and laments, “Oh, my bad merit. My lack of merit. If only I hadn’t left my ancestral territory today, the hawk would have been no match for me.” Now the hawk hears this and is a little peeved. He says, “What is your ancestral territory?” And the quail says, “I feel like a field, plowed with the stones all turned up.” So the hawk lets him go. He says, “Well, you can go there, but you’re still no match for me even there.” So the quail goes down and stands on one of the stones and says, “Come get me, you hawk. Come get me, you hawk.” And the hawk folds its wings and swoops down on the quail. As the quail realizes, “Okay, he’s almost on me,” he slips behind the stone and the hawk shatters his breast on the stone. The hawk here is supposed to stand for mara, and the field turned up with stones is the establishing of mindfulness, either with the breath or with feelings, with mind states, mental qualities. But the primary focus is with the body. When the Buddha teaches about how to develop the four establishments of mindfulness, he teaches the how-to part of the instruction. You start with the breath and you stay with the breath. So take this as your safe spot. You need it as you go through the day. Especially tomorrow, when we’re going to be having lots of people up here. It’s going to be very easy for your attention to get frazzled because it gets scattered. You leave your position of strength, and the presence of a lot of other people becomes unpleasant. But if you have the sense of being centered inside, you’re in your position of strength. You’re in a spot where nobody else can catch you. Then you find that you can get through the experience a lot more easily, with a lot less being worn away. Back when we were young, building the jetty, building the Buddha image, people knew that they could work for hours. As long as they stayed with the breath. We’d have these cement pourings that would go on all night long. Or when you’re sculpting the Buddha image, the work just went on for 24 hours. People would stop and take little naps here and there, but then go back to work. They noticed that as long as they were with the breath in their body, centered that way, they could keep up the work. They had the strength. The mind is our major source of strength. We’re taught how much our diet, the various foods we eat, the various medicines we take, have an impact on our strength. But our culture really underestimates the power of the mind. So you want to maintain your strength. Don’t worry, you’ll be dealing with a lot of people and you want to be able to keep up your good humor. Good humor requires strength. So stay right here. There are two images you can keep in mind as you focus with the breath. They contradict each other a little bit, but you can try to see which one is most helpful. One is of the breath as a shield. If you have a sense of the breath energy in the body, all connected, all the different breath channels are working together, the breath feels good all the way throughout the body. It’s like a shield. The energy is coming in, just bouncing off the shield. The other image is somewhat different. It’s like the mind is a big screen. The wind goes through the screen, but the screen isn’t disturbed by the wind. You’ve got a lot of space in your body. All these energies can go right through, but you don’t have to catch them. The purpose of both of these is that you, on the one hand, don’t leave any open spots where people can come in and inhabit your area, your space, but primarily that you don’t catch things from other people, especially negative things. So try to keep your focus right here. Find your center and see if you can maintain it, not only while you’re sitting here quietly with very few distractions, but you want to have the determination that you’re going to stay here regardless of the number of distractions. We often think that meditation is something that has to be done in a very quiet spot, and in the beginning it’s very useful to have a quiet spot. But there comes a point where you realize you’ve got to learn how to take it out into the world, where there are lots of distractions around you. That’s what concentration is all about. You’re going to stay focused on one thing regardless of the other things. You have to learn how to let them go. I visited a music school in Korea one time, classical music. And unlike our classical music schools, where they have individual practice rooms, it was just one big room with people around the wall of the room playing their instruments or singing their songs or whatever. It was really good practice in concentration. You could see that they had to stay focused. So you have to let the things out there that could otherwise distract you, just let them go. You’ve got to hold on to your one thing here. This is a good image for the path in general. The path is not just for people who hide away in the forest or hide away in a cave someplace up in the mountains. It’s for people to follow all the way through life, which means that you have to learn how to hold on to this one thing and let everything else go. The world out there offers all kinds of opportunities for finding pleasures in all kinds of ways. And as the media gets more and more sophisticated, those opportunities multiply. Then you find that you’ve got lots of little selves in here that build up around desires that come from seeing something or hearing something, hearing about something. It makes you want to go, makes you want to taste, makes you want to see again. But you have to realize that if you let all of those little selves have what they want, nothing much gets accomplished in your life because everything is running off in different directions. You have to realize that some of these selves have to be let go. You have to downsize inside to hold on to the desires that really are worthwhile and that really will lead to well-being. That old principle that if you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, you have to be willing to abandon the lesser happiness. For many of us, we have so many little happinesses that we think that the sum total would be bigger than one big happiness. But it’s not the case. They’re all just little fragments. The big happiness is something that doesn’t change, has no way of harming anybody. There’s nothing blameworthy about it at all. That’s something special. There’s one of it. It’s more than all the other pleasures of the world combined. So, downsize inside. Have that one spot inside that’s your home base. And try to keep your focus as you deal with the other things that come up in the world. You will have to deal with other people and other things. But make sure that your priorities are straight. Make sure that your mind is one, not only the sense of being focused on one object, but it is number one. Something whose well-being comes above everything else. Notice that this is not selfish. We had that chant just now that included in all the aspects of the training. There was showing respect and welcoming guests. When you have a lot of guests, you have to make sure that you’re welcoming and that you have your position of strength. Otherwise they’ll wear you down. But if you can maintain this position of strength, you can maintain the kind of good humor that makes the act of making merit with a lot of people actually enjoyable.

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