Bringing Something New to the Present

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Pose the question in your mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” And sometimes the body will respond, breathing in a different way, into parts of the body that don’t normally get breath energy, or in a way that feels soothing, more soothing than it has been, or more energizing than it has been. Depending on what the body needs. Sometimes it doesn’t respond, in which case you’ve got to give it a little nudge, pose the question again, “What kind of effect would long breathing have? How about shorter breathing, deeper? What kind of perception can I hold in mind that would help get a sense of the breath coming in from all directions?” You want to get on good terms with your body, not only so that you can sit through the hour here with a minimum of pain, but so that the mind also has something good to feed on. Because even if it doesn’t have something comfortable to feed on in the sense of the form of the body, it’s going to go after sensual pleasures, and that covers not only sexual things but also just any pleasure that has to do with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. Things you touch outside, things you taste, smell, listen to, look at. If the body’s not providing a good sense of pleasure from within, your sense of the form of the body, the mind’s going to go looking for pleasures outside. And it may deny to itself that that’s what it’s doing, but that’s what it’s doing. The mind likes to feed, so give it something better to feed on. And as you get better and better with this, as you sit and meditate, then you want to try to carry it out into the world. At first this may seem like just adding one more burden to the many burdens and responsibilities and issues you have to deal with as you go through the day. But actually, you’re backing up a little bit. You’re already carrying a lot of things into the world, how you deal with the energies in your body, how you carry perceptions of the people around you, perceptions of who you are and what your image is out there. We’re carrying a lot of baggage already as we go into that world. You look into the Buddha’s analysis of causes of suffering. There’s intention and attention and perceptions and contact and feeling, fabrications of all kinds. This is what we bring into things, every situation we come into. And what we’re doing is going back a little bit and trying to retrain ourselves. You can look at it in one way as realizing that you’ve had bad posture for a long time. Now you’ve got to be very conscious about pulling your shoulders down and back, straightening your back, or whatever else it is that you’ve been doing that’s been bad for your posture. That requires that you have to be very conscious of your posture in addition to doing everything else. It seems like a burden to begin with, and it will be something that eats into the mind’s range of attention. But you keep doing that until it gets more natural, and then it becomes less and less of a burden, more of what you’re naturally bringing in. Because our idea of what’s natural is more what’s habitual. Sometimes we have to go back and retrain ourselves in some very basic skills, like our posture. Or you can look at it another way. You’re bringing in a sense of well-being. You can be with your breath, not so much the in-and-out breath as when you’re trying to go through the day, because that’s a little bit much to ask when you’re dealing with tasks that require a lot of attention. But your general quality of breath energy in the body, how does this feel or process of breath energy? Can you sense when it’s tightening up? Can you loosen that tension with just a quick thought? And then get back to your work, but have a background sense of how things are going in the body, how things are going in the mind. Again, this will take up a little bit more of your range of awareness than the body has taken before, but it’s essential to keeping the mind well-fed. We’ve all had that experience of eating food that tastes really good when you’re very hungry, but when you’re not quite so hungry, you say, “This is garbage.” This is one of the ways in which we learn how not to be gobbling down the world so much. Part of us says, “Well, as I do this, the world around me seems to be less appealing, it’s not quite so much fun anymore.” Well, think about that. You’re feeding off of something good inside now, and all the tastes that you had in the world before begin to reveal themselves to what they really were. Not all that satisfying. So think of those factors that the Buddha says are the ones that you bring into any situation. What are you paying attention to? What is your intention as you go into any situation? Are you intending to deal with it skillfully? What are your perceptions of the situation? What is your perception of you and what you’re going to be getting out of this, and what you’re going to be able to give to the situation? If you can carry a comfortable feeling tone in the body, it makes you a lot less hungry. And things outside look less and less like food, and more and more like what they are. That means that you’re stepping back from your normal way of engaging with other people. Even though there may be a sense that you’re at a little distance from them, well, maybe that’s a healthy distance. In the same way that not gobbling something down and stepping back from it is putting you at a healthy distance from what you used to take as food. Then you look carefully at it. In the case of people, what do they need? What do they really need, as opposed to what you think they would need or what you would like to feed off of them in your perceptions of their needs? So you don’t go through life as if it were a hunger game. You’re well fed. You see people as people. Trees as trees. The sky as the sky. And that is potential food. So even though it requires stepping back a bit and retraining yourself in some very basic skills, after a while the new trained skills become more and more second nature. And you find that your relationship to the environment around you is a lot healthier. Both in terms of your posture and in terms of what you’re feeding on.

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