Continuity

June 20, 2015

Start with some good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the process of breathing. Allow your attention to settle there. It can be anywhere in the body. The breath is the energy flow that allows the air to come in and out of the lungs. Where the air passes through the nose, and other times you notice it more someplace else. Wherever it’s most prominent, take that as your point of focus. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Thinking about breathing is direct to thought. But adjusting, testing things, that’s evaluation. When you bring these two qualities together with the ability to stay with one object, you’ve got the causes of right concentration. Those are the things you have to focus on. Thinking about the breath. Evaluating the breath. Evaluating means not only changing the rhythm to make it feel good, but also, once you’ve found a rhythm, a texture of breathing that feels good, asking yourself, “What’s the best use that can be made out of that sense of pleasure?” You can spread it around. As you breathe in, think of the comfortable breath energy coming in and nourishing all the nerves of the body, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. And you notice that, in some cases, comfortable breath energy flows in some parts of the body, but not in others. So you can ask yourself, “Why is it not flowing?” Maybe you’re tensing up a muscle in some part of the body, or something feels constricted. Can you loosen up that tension? Because ultimately you want the sense of ease to fill the body as much as possible. This is why when we talk about the singleness of the preoccupation here, we don’t talk about one-pointedness. We’re talking about one object, breath. The perception of breath fills the body. The actual sensation of breathing fills the body. Your awareness fills the body. This is why it’s called mindfulness immersed in the body. It’s fully here. As for other concerns right now, you can let them go. As we were saying earlier today, it makes a lot of sense to stay here with a sense of ease. It’s simple, but it’s not necessarily easy, because the mind has other priorities sometimes. It’s like the mind is a committee. Some members of the committee are happy to be meditating, and other members of the committee have other agendas. But you want to fill the body with as much comfortable breath energy as possible to state your case that you want to stay here. Make it strong. Then, when there is a sense of well-being, you can ask yourself, “Do you really want to trash this to go someplace else?” And some parts of the mind will be willing. “This is just a little bit of pleasure, but I’ve got something more important to deal with.” This is where you have to bring in right view. Right concentration is not just a technique. It comes as part of a whole package, all the factors of the past, starting with right view. Not only what is suffering, what’s causing it, and how it can be brought to an end, but simply the fact that the way the mind is creating suffering is the big issue in life. That right there is quite a statement of values. Because lots of people can think of other issues that are more important for them. But you notice that the way you take care of the mind here in the present moment and the extent to which you are creating suffering for your mind in the present moment, that actually gets in the way of your other responsibilities and your ability to deal well with other concerns. A lot of people complain that when you take time out to meditate, you don’t have time for other activities. But if you don’t meditate, the mind gets worn down pretty quickly. It wears itself down. So while you’re here, you want to be one hundred percent here. If the mind is saying, “We’ve got this other responsibility to think about,” or, “You’ve got this entertaining bit of news you want to mull over,” the entertainment can wait. You can work with the breath to make it entertaining, make it interesting right now. As for other responsibilities, remind yourself that to deal with your outside responsibilities, you need a mind that is well-settled, a mind that is clear, mindful, alert, well-concentrated, and a mind that is well-established, well-prepared, and well-organized. This is what you’re doing right now. You’re putting the mind in that shape so it can take on other responsibilities when the time comes. So combine the techniques of concentration with right view and all the other right factors of the path. As the Buddha said, right concentration is the heart of the path. It needs the other factors of the path as its requisites. In other words, what nourishes it, what protects it, what keeps it from going off in the wrong direction. So for the time being, this is all you have to worry about. This is all you have to concern yourself with, is how to get the mind to be with the breath as continually as possible. This question of continuity makes a lot of difference, because there are going to be a lot of things you’re going to miss if the mind is hopping around. It stays with the breath for a little while, then wanders off a bit, and then it comes back. Well, what happened in that little period when you wandered off? It’s like watching a TV show. You wander into the room, and then you wander out, and then you wander back in again. A lot of TV shows are kind of dumb, so it doesn’t matter that you’ve wandered out. But things going on in the mind are a lot more subtle. You can miss really important things. It’s like the people who say they understand 50 percent of what’s being said when they’re listening to another language. How do you know what’s going on in the other 50 percent? That might change the meaning of the parts that you think you do know. And it’s the same with watching your mind. If you’re here 50 percent of the time and someplace else the rest of the time, who knows what’s going on in those periods when you’re away? And to what extent does that change the meaning of what’s happening while you’re here? To say nothing at 50 percent, you can be away just 10 percent of the time or 3 percent of the time, and you miss a lot of the things that are actually really important to say. So you want to make your awareness here as continual as possible. Not only does it give the mind more of a chance to rest, but your insight into the mind is going to become a lot clearer. And a lot more incisive. Because all too often the reason the mind wanders off a little bit here and there is because it’s trying to hide something from itself. And yet those are precisely the things you’re going to need to know to make a difference. Again, we talked earlier today about the ability to see the drawbacks of some of your distractions. But if you don’t see the reason why you go for them, you’re never going to be able to deal with them, because there’s that little bit of a hook that keeps bringing the mind back. So when there’s the slightest temptation to move off, you’ve got to have your radar ready for that, to see, “Okay, what’s the mind going for? Why is it going?” And one of the best ways to know why it’s going is to resist it. You’ve got to stay right here. Right here, right here. Double your efforts to stay right here. And sometimes some member of the committee will let something slip and begin to realize, “Oh, you went for that because of this little bit of pleasure.” Whether it had to do with pride, or had to do with greed, or had to do with resentment, or whatever. Because all too often the reasons we go for these things are reasons that we’re ashamed of, and so we hide them from ourselves. Just simply the ability to stay right here will dig up a lot of stuff that wouldn’t get dug up and wouldn’t get examined otherwise. This is one of the ways in which being really continuous in your mindfulness, being really continuous in your concentration, can lead to insight. The two can go together. Particularly if you maintain that quality of right view. For the time being, whatever comes up in the mind that’s not related to your awareness of the breath, regard it as a problem, regard it as something to be suspicious of. And you find that you’ll learn an awful lot of things about your own mind. We read in the texts about how to develop discernment. Three characteristics, three perceptions, you might call them. But how those are going to apply specifically to your defilements right now, right here, that’s going to be a very individual matter, and it may not be the way you expect it. So keep this point in mind, that the more continuous your awareness, the more you’ll learn, the more things you’re going to dig up. It’s like plowing a field. I remember when I was a child, every year my father or grandfather would be out plowing the field behind the home. And they’d come in with Indian arrowheads every year. You’d think that that field had been plowed enough times that there wouldn’t be any more arrowheads to find, but they were there. It was because the plow kept going down the field. It didn’t skip around. It kept going from one end to the other and then back. That’s how you dig things up. I learned an analogy from one of my teacher’s students. She learned this lesson from a jhanfuga. It’s like putting a needle on a record. The old-fashioned record is where you had needles. And if the needle doesn’t jump around, you’ll hear everything that’s on the record. It’ll just follow that groove around. And around and around, because it doesn’t jump. If it jumps around, you’re not going to know anything about what’s on the record. So follow the groove of your breath right now. Plow a nonstop furrow here through the rest of the hour and see what comes up.

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