Taking Care of Business Inside

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Sometimes, when you direct the mind to the breath and it goes right for it, it’s ready to drop all of its other concerns, settle down with the breath, and have a sense of well-being because it feels at home here. It feels like this is where it belongs. There are other times when you direct your mind to the breath and it goes anywhere but That’s because you run into other things on the way, things that deflect you. In cases like this, you have to learn how to herd your mind into the breath, because the mind here at this point is like a herd. It’s got lots of different ideas and it’s running off in all directions. So you have to be like a sheepdog running around this side, running around that side, having at least some semblance of order in the mind. These are the times when you have to think your way into stillness. And the first prerequisite for this is to have some patience, realizing that the mind has some very strong currents, and if you just run across the currents you get pushed away. So you have to deflect them a little bit. There’s no quick way to learn patience. And Jhamma Abho was one time asked about the easy way to develop strength and effort in the practice. He said the whole point of it is that it’s not easy. Well, it’s the same with patience. You can’t develop a quick way to become patient. Patience requires that you be willing to sit with it for a while, take some time. But with the confidence that even though your mind may seem like a mess all over the place right now, it’s not always going to be that way. This is where conviction and the path comes in to give you some help. If you keep chipping away, chipping away, chipping away at the mind, eventually you’ll chipper your way through. This is why we have the reflections before the meditation. Reflections on aging, illness, and death. And that’s only part of the reflection. In the actual sutta, the Buddha has you think even further, that everybody, everywhere, is subject to these same things. And the question he has you ask is, “Are you prepared when aging comes? Are you prepared when illness comes? Are you prepared when death comes?” A typical problem when we’re trying to meditate is the thought that this is a selfish activity. Our culture teaches this. You find even Buddhist teachers in the West teaching that it’s very selfish to try to find your own happiness. But you’re looking for a happiness that’s not only true, but also harmless. What could possibly be shameful about that? And you’re taking care of business inside. The Buddhist teachings focus primarily on this level. The level of your awareness, the part that you don’t share with anybody else. We have words that can talk about what’s going on in the mind, but your actual experience of your own breath, your actual experience of your feelings, your perceptions, your thoughts, that’s totally yours. As the Buddha pointed out, it’s this internal level of our awareness that’s where suffering happens, but it’s where it’s caused. That’s also where we can put an end to it. This is called taking care of business inside. And when you look at other people who are a burden on others, it’s largely because they haven’t learned how to take care of business inside. And so they go flailing around. Sometimes they intentionally flail around and try to get your help. Other times you simply see them when they’re in a state where they can’t communicate very well, either because they’re too young or too sick or too old. Or they’re too close to death. And there’s nothing you can do. And this is what really pulls at the heart, what really tears the heart apart of all the people around. So at the very least, you’re learning how to take care of business inside. You’re learning how to deal with your thoughts so they don’t pull you in unskillful directions. You’re learning how to deal with your reaction to pleasure and pain so they don’t overwhelm you. And we learn how to handle this. It’s not only a gift to yourself, it’s a gift to others. So always keep that in mind. There’s that little nagging voice that says that you’re running away from responsibilities out there. This is your big responsibility. This is your primary responsibility. Nobody else can handle this business for you. And when you think in this way, it’s a lot easier to focus down inside. Because you’re dealing with an issue that’s very important—how you deal with aging, illness, and death. How you deal with separation. Well, you learn to rely on your own actions. This is another reason why we want to focus in the present moment. It’s because our actions come out of our mind. And if the mind is out of control, then our actions are out of control. So it’s another good reason to focus down here. One of the problems when you come straight to the meditation, if you’ve been dealing with narratives, stories about what’s going on in your life outside, is that sometimes it’s hard to drop the narratives. And if you haven’t been playing a good role in the narratives, it’s even harder. Even if you have been playing a good role in the narratives, the fact that you still have this sense of you and how you’re handling the situation, that can get in the way of your meditation. This is why we have those thoughts about all living beings. It’s one of the problems of having a narrative as you bring it into the meditation. The narrative is, “What kind of meditator are you? You’re not getting settled down. You’ve got a nice place to meditate, and your mind is all over the place. And you start getting down in yourself. That doesn’t help at all. There are cases where the famous Jains in Thailand talk about how they would scold themselves when the mind was getting obstreperous. But they always scolded themselves to raise their morale, to lift their morale, not to tear it down. So if you find yourself tearing yourself down, stop and go back to those reflections on all living beings. At the least you have the desire to meditate. How many people out there in the world have a desire to meditate? As long as you’ve got the desire, there’s hope. And don’t be afraid that this is going to make you conceited. That’s the kind of thought you need right now. If you find yourself getting conceited or complacent about the meditation, okay, that’s when you think about all the people who meditate better than you do. They can do it. And you can do it too. But when you need encouragement, when you need to have your morale boosted, learn to think in ways that give you morale. These are just a few examples of the ways you can think to help the mind settle down, to drift down to the breath. If the mind isn’t willing to come straight down to the breath, think of it as an airplane coming in for a landing. You can’t just drop down, you can’t put yourself right over the landing field and then drop straight down. It has to come in from an angle. And sometimes it has to circle around a couple times before it gets the angle right. So in the same way, be patient with yourself, but persistent. Keep trying to come back to the breath. The fact that you catch yourself wandering off, that’s a good sign right there. The more quickly you can bring yourself back, the better. That’s even a better sign. Learn how to encourage yourself as you try to do this. In this way, the mind can begin to settle in. But even then, you’re going to have to use some thinking. It’s not the case that you can go straight to a sensation of breathing without any thinking around it. Even as you’ve put aside a lot of your other distractions, you find there’s a little thing inside that can still get in the way. John Lee compares us to lying down and realizing that you’ve got little bits of gravel under your sheet. You’ve got dust on the sheet, or you’ve got bugs on the sheet. You’ve got to take care of them one by one by one. Shake out the sheet. Clean things very nicely underneath. Then you can settle down. Part of this has to do with how the breath energy is in your body. You may find that the breathing feels good in some parts of the body, but not in others. Focus on the areas where it does feel good, and then see if you can spread the good energy to the other parts. Sometimes you find that you can’t even find the other parts. You can trace things down through your chest and you’ve got something coming up from your hand, but what happens to your arm and your shoulder in the middle? You don’t know. Very carefully, carefully trace things through. They are connected. It’s just that the inner sense of where they’re connected may not be right where you think the actual arm is. So explore things for a bit. Be willing to move through the body and find areas where the breath energy is not quite where you want it to be and learn how to work with it. In the course of this, you have to learn how to have just the right touch. If you’re too aggressive in changing the breath energy in the body, then you just create more pressure. If you don’t do anything with the breath at all, you’re not taking advantage of the fact that you do have some choice in how you breathe. So learn how to think. Allow the breath energy to go in different places. That’s all you have to do. Think. You don’t have to put any physical pressure on it. Just hold the right perception in mind that all the parts of the body are porous to the flow of the breath energy. There’s no reason why anything has to be blocked. Even where you feel bands of tension, the breath can still flow right through. Hold that perception in mind. When you find that the breathing changes its rhythm, you can let go. It becomes more relaxing to the body. This allows the mind to settle down on a more subtle level. So there are times when settling down can be quick, and other times when it has to be a gradual process. The important thing is that you stick with it either way, because you’re taking care of your work inside, your job inside, which is to figure out how to handle your awareness of yourself and how to handle your awareness of the world in a way that doesn’t cause any suffering, doesn’t cause any harm. That’s a noble goal. That’s a noble aspiration. And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

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