The Real Work Is Inside

September 23, 2015

When the Buddha taught breath meditation, he’d start out in two different ways. In some cases, he’d just jump right in with the instructions on how to focus on the breath. He’d say to find a quiet spot, sit cross-legged, hold your body erect, bring mindfulness to the fore. Mindfully breathe in, mindfully breathe out, and then go through the sixteen steps. Other times, though, he’d talk about preliminary exercises. Contemplation of the inconstancy, contemplation of not-self, contemplation of the elements. Then you’d get into the sixteen steps. That second kind of instruction that was designed for times of the mind is not really ready to settle down in the present moment. It’s got other issues. Issues you know are there, pulling you away, even as you try to think about meditating. Or others that you know are potentially going to be problems. Because it is good to think sometimes about why you don’t want to let go. Don’t let yourself get distracted by why there’s nothing out there right now that you need to pay attention to, or that’s even worth paying attention to. You’ve got to see that what you’re doing inside your mind right now, straightening out your mind inside right now, is the most important thing you can be doing. So the various contemplations that the Buddha recommends are designed for giving rise to an emotion called sanghvega. You look at the things of the world, you look at the affairs of the world, you look at your affairs in the world, past, present, and future, and you gain a sense of how precarious the whole thing is, and how blind life can often be when making decisions. As one philosopher once said, “Living forward, but understanding backward.” We can look back on past decisions and get a sense of whether they were right or wrong. But trying to make decisions right now that will have an influence into the future, we’re often just acting blindly. You also want to get a sense of the dangers of acting blindly, seeing how precarious the whole process can be, and ask yourself, “Can you really base your happiness on that?” Like those Dhamma reflections we had just now, the world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. It’s nothing of its own. The world here, of course, is your world. And even though it poses all these dangers and has all this element of uncertainty, still we’re a slave to craving. We keep going for it again and again and again. And when you say “danger,” you see something even fearful in that. Because the word sanghvega can mean dismay, it can mean even a sense of terror. Because if you don’t get the mind trained, look where it could possibly go. There are all kinds of possibilities. And all the little plans that the mind makes to hedge against uncertainty, you see how easily they can be swept away. There’s a great passage in Joseph and his brother Thomas Mann’s book, about when Joseph’s mother is dying and everyone’s gathering together and they’re chanting little chants and saying little spells to keep death at bay. And Joseph’s father suddenly gets a sense of how weak all our little preparations are in the face of the fact of aging, illness, and death. These things are huge. They’re tsunamis waiting to sweep us away. And we build little huts on stilts at the edge of the beach, hoping that they’ll provide some protection. So you can think in these ways. It helps the mind to settle down as you look around it. You look east, west, north, and south, any direction where you can go to send the mind out to gain something of interest. And you find yourself hemmed in on all sides. And you realize true freedom doesn’t lie in going out there. It lies in digging down in here. And John Lee mentions this in his book on Frames of Reverence, when he talks about the various ways of bringing the mind to stillness as you contemplate the body, which is trying to get the mind to settle down in the present moment. And in every case, the contemplations are designed to bring a sense of sanghvega. And it’s through sanghvega that the mind is willing to be still. You see that wherever you head out in any direction, there’s danger and there’s a lot of uncertainty. And so you learn to pin your hopes on the certainty of inside. This is where some real work can be done. So depending on each session, each meditation, you might find that sometimes you have to think in these terms, and other times the mind is ready to settle down already. You don’t have to worry about thinking too much. Just focus on the breath. So remember you have these alternatives. Sometimes you have the belief that meditation is all about not thinking. Well, some thinking is necessary to clear a space inside, to get your attitude straight so the mind is willing to settle down. And you have arguments to use against any impulses that would head outside. So whatever contemplation helps, use that to cut off the bridges that would allow you to wander off. There’s a series of contemplations where the Buddha talks about how you could search the whole world over. It would be very hard to find someone who hadn’t been your mother at some point in the long distant past, or in the long course of time. It would be hard to find someone who wasn’t your father, your brother, your sister, your son, your daughter. Some people use that contemplation as a basis for developing thoughts of goodwill and seeing all beings as equally deserving of your goodwill. The Buddha, however, talks about how contemplating this gives rise to a sense of dismay, seeing ourselves going through this process of gaining attachments, finding people we cherish and love, and now having to lose them again. And it’s not always the case that the relationship is good, but we keep going after it again and again and again. So that contemplation can help. When you’re ready to settle down, it can be with a breath. Try to inhabit your sense of the body as fully as you can, having set up this fence around you. We don’t like to think of ourselves as being hemmed in by a fence. It’s better to think of ourselves as being protected by it. It’s in the protection of the fence that we can dig deep down. What’s going on in the mind right now? What’s pushing the mind right now? Try to get it as still as possible and see where the pushes are coming from. You can’t see the movements of the mind until you’ve got it very still. It’s like those detectors who try to detect heat from far distant stars. They have to get them very, very, very cold. It’s only in the stillness that you can detect movement. So focus on a spot in the body that seems congenial, and then spread your awareness around so you feel like you’re inhabiting the whole body. Your feet are in your feet, your hands are in your hands, your head is in your head. In other words, your inner sense of the body is right here. You’re not running off and inhabiting other worlds. You’re inhabiting this spot, this place right here. It’s this sense of your own inner awareness, the part that you don’t share with anyone else. That’s where the problem of suffering is found. We can talk about our pains, we can talk about our sufferings, but we can’t bring them out to show other people. Each has his or her own. The causes are also in here. Sometimes the mind wants to go flowing outside because it sees, “My problem is with these people or with that situation.” Or this trend in the world. That’s ignoring the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha says, “Change is outside. Those are to be expected.” The stress that comes from those changes is something to be expected. We do what we can to protect ourselves from violent change or really horrible change, but there’s always so much we can do. The real suffering that weighs down the mind is the suffering that comes from within. It comes from that flow of craving that we’re enslaved to. So that’s in here, too. Unfortunately, the path depends on developing qualities, again, that are in this level of your awareness, right here inside. So you want to inhabit this area as fully as you can, to be as sensitive as you can to what’s going on. You can start asking questions. Asking the right questions and getting useful answers. The Buddha never tried to embarrass people or make people feel ashamed by the fact that they’re working on their own business. This is our business right here. He didn’t say you have to go out and awaken other people first or whatever. Straightening yourself out inside, that’s noble work. It helps take you out of the food chain. It makes you a good example for other people. It allows you to find a happiness that’s really harmless. So all these good things are in here. The potential for these good things are in here. So try to do your work in here as much as you can. Learn to train the mind so that it can see itself clearly in here. The breath is a good way of doing this because it fills the body. And it’s also the property of the body that you can manipulate and play with most easily. So you’re going to help adjust things inside so it feels good to be here. We stay with the breath partly because it’s something we’re going to hold onto. You’re working with the breath, you’re knowing your present moment. But also working with the breath allows us to develop a sense of feeling at home here. It’s not just a house in the body, it’s the home in the body. As you learn how to adjust things, how to ease your awareness into the body, ease your awareness into the breath, ease the breath into the body, start sensing various levels of the breath. You’re staying here not only with a sense of well-being, but also a sense of interest, curiosity. I know that Ajahn Lee developed method two in response to having had a heart attack. He was able to pull his health together. He was out in the middle of the jungle, had almost no medicine at all. The only way he was going to recover was through working with the breath. He was able to do that. The breath has that kind of potential. So whether your concentration is based primarily on the desire to get the mind to be still, based primarily on your energy to get the mind still, your interest, or the desire to figure things out, those are called the four bases of success. They’re the various elements. You have to have all four in your concentration, but you find that sometimes you’re stressing one of them or emphasizing one of them or emphasizing another one. But regardless, learn that the mind needs various ways of getting it to settle down, and to stay settled down, to take an interest here, to be happy here, to be disinclined to go wandering outside. That’s when you can fully understand what’s happening here and make the most of this opportunity to really explore inside and straighten things out right inside, right here.

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