The Power to Change (outside)

September 27, 2015

Okay, let’s meditate. John Suat used to say when we started to meditate, put your mind in the right attitude. Remember that meditation is one of the best things you can be doing with your time. You’re working on your mind, which is the source of all things in your life. All the happiness, all the pain, they come eventually from your own mind. You may say that there are pleasant things outside, there are painful things outside, but the pleasure and the pain that come deep into the mind are the things that are created by the mind itself as it deals with outside pleasure. In other words, there can be pleasures outside and you can still suffer. There can be pains outside and you can still be perfectly fine. Because the mind is the source of all your actions and has an influence not only on your pleasure and pain, but it creates conditions for other people too. So you want to be able to straighten it out so that your influence on other people is a good influence. Meditation is not a selfish activity. Some people say we’re doing this just for ourselves, but when you straighten out your mind, the influence spreads out like ripples on a pond. You throw a stone in and the ripples can go all the way across the pond, even if the stone stays just in one spot. So try to bring a cheerful attitude in the meditation. If events in the day are not making you cheerful, just remind yourself this is your special time, a time that you can focus on your mind directly without any outside interference. You get to know your mind very thoroughly. So to know the mind, we need to bring it to one spot, and that’s why we focus on the breath. The breath is one spot right here in the present moment. There’s no future breath you can watch. There’s no past breath you can watch. You can only watch the present. So when you’re with the breath, you’re in the present moment, and that means you have access to your mind in the present moment as well. Your frame of reference isn’t pulling you away. So stay right here. Feel the breath coming in, feel the breath going out. Try to feel it as deeply in the body as you can. This provides you with your grounding. If you’re focused only on one spot, it’s very easy for that spot to move. And especially if you’re planning to be able to take your concentration into the rest of your life. It can’t be just a one-spotted concentration or a one-point concentration. Because if it’s only one spot, then if you’re aware of anything else, your concentration is destroyed. But if your concentration is broadly based, deeply based inside the body, this provides the framework. Other things can come and they can go, and you can be aware of them within the framework. As long as your framework is solidly there, your concentration is still maintained. It’s still strong. You still have your grounding inside. So breathe deeply into the body. Try to be fully aware of the body. Breathe deeply all at once, or you can go through it section by section. First down around the navel, then move up around the stomach, then up to the chest, into the throat, into the head, then down the shoulders to the tips of the fingers, then down again from the neck, down the back, down through the hips, down through the legs, out to the tips of the toes. Get to know how your body feels from inside. This is the part of your awareness that you don’t share with anyone else, and this can be your home base. Nobody can push you out of this. As long as you’re alive, this is your area, this is your space. Even if you pass away, there’s no sense that you’re going someplace else. Events are all going to be happening right here in your awareness. It’s like going from one dream to another dream. You’re always right here, right here, wherever the location of the dream may be. And when we die, this is the spot where it happens. And when we’re reborn, this is the spot where it happens. So you want to get to know this spot really well. Your mind, your awareness, right here, right now. And give yourself this large frame. Once you’ve been through the body and that survey a couple of times, see if you can focus your attention on one spot, and then from that one spot, spread out to fill the whole body, and stay with the whole body. This means that any other thoughts that come up won’t have a place to take hold. If you shrink your awareness down to focus on them, okay, they’ve taken hold of you. Because you took hold of them, so you don’t have to take hold of your thoughts. Think of them as people passing by on the street. You’re not responsible for greeting everybody you pass on the street. You greet only the people you know will be good to talk to. It’s the same with your thoughts. You don’t have to engage every thought that comes in your mind. You don’t have to take responsibility for every thought that comes in your mind. A lot of this stuff comes from your past actions. What you’re responsible for is what you are doing right now. When the Buddha is talking about alertness as a quality in meditation, this is what he’s talking about, being aware of what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. As for everything else right now, you can let it go, let it go. We spend so much time focusing on what other people are doing, we miss what we’re doing ourselves. We don’t see what we’re doing. But as the Buddha said, the source of all our suffering lies in here, in the things that we’re doing. Because we’re not aware of what we’re doing, we don’t know. We don’t know what we’re doing, we don’t know the results of what we’re doing. And so often there’s a level of stress in the mind that we just take for granted. This is the way things have to be, we think. Actually, it’s the mind’s own activities that are creating that stress. This is when the Buddha’s talking about inconstancy. This is what he wants you to look at, the fact that your actions are inconstant and the level of stress inside your mind is inconstant. It goes up, goes down, goes up and down, depending on what you’re doing. And to see the connection, you have to get everything else really, really clear, really, really still, so that the little movements of the mind will be visible. So develop this full body awareness and try to make it full body, keep it full body, as long as you can. Now, one part of the mind will say, “This isn’t entertaining,” or “Nothing’s happening.” But a lot of things you want to see in the world, a lot of things you want to understand, require that you learn how to wait. Take time to be very still, to provide the circumstances, to provide the environment in which you can see what you want to see. It’s like scientists going down into the ocean. They want to study the plant life there. They want to study the animal life there. Some days they go down and they don’t see anything at all. Everything’s hiding. But they don’t count that as a wasted day. They don’t give up. They say, “Well, let’s go back the next day. Maybe we’re at the wrong spot. We move the spot a little bit.” Or maybe they didn’t know what to look for, so they have to look more carefully. Because sometimes you look on the ocean floor and what looks like rocks are actually kinds of animals that have learned how to disguise themselves. And it’s the same in your mind. A lot of things that look like the normal furniture of your mind are actions that are disguising themselves. They’re actually causing suffering, and they’re making decisions, and you don’t see that. It just looks like, “Well, that’s the way things are.” But that attitude, “Well, that’s the way things are.” Doesn’t give anybody new insight, anybody new understanding. Like the story they tell of Isaac Newton sitting under the tree. Apple falls, hits him on the head. And the science of his time said, “Well, that’s just the way things are. Apples fall.” But he asked the question, “Why does the apple fall?” Maybe something else is going on. Maybe it’s just in the nature of the apple just to fall. Because what way does the apple differ from the earth? That’s how he came up with his theory of gravity. It’s because he asked questions and didn’t just accept things as, “Well, that’s the way they are.” There’s a reason for, “That’s the way they are,” and you want to find the reason. Because the other question is, “Do they have to be that way? Do they have to keep on being that way?” Maybe they can change. And it’s the same with the level of stress you create in the mind. You don’t have to accept it. You can question it. “What am I doing that’s adding stress?” What things, when I do them, will lower the level of stress in the mind? Learn to think in terms of actions, especially your own action. It’s all too easy to blame other people for the problems you have in life. And sometimes your external problems are caused by other people. But your internal problems, people don’t have to cause them. You don’t have to make them responsible. In fact, if you make them responsible, there’s very little chance that you’re going to be able to cure your own problems, heal the wounds in the mind. So it’s not like you’re taking blame for your own suffering. It’s simply that you’re saying, “Look, I’m doing something that’s wrong and I can change it.” This teaching is meant to give you power. Power over your own mind, over your own thoughts. So when a thought comes into the mind, you’re not yet slave. You can look at it and say, “This is something I don’t want to get involved with,” and it will dissolve away from lack of interest. Other thoughts, you encourage them. Thoughts that deal with renunciation, thoughts that deal with goodwill, thoughts that deal with trying to develop yourself in the path. These are all good thoughts. It’s not like we’re trying to get rid of all thinking. We use thinking as part of the path. But we have to learn how to use it skillfully. You want to look at what you’re doing, how you’re thinking, how you’re talking to yourself. The labels you put on things. If pain comes up, how do you label it? Is the way you’re labeling the pain causing the trouble? Can you change the label? Be prepared for the fact that things you learn about, say, pain, or how you react to pain today, may be useful again tomorrow and they may not be useful tomorrow, because after all, your mind is a very complex phenomenon. It’s like a huge corporation in here. Lots of people in lots of different offices with lots of different views. Some people in some offices have the view from the upper story, some are down in the basement and can’t see very much. But everybody’s sending emails to everybody else. Everybody’s sending lines to everybody else. So you take care of one problem, one problem employee in your corporation, today, and you’ll find there’s another one someplace else in the corporation tomorrow. This is going to take time to sort this out. Get everybody in the corporation well-trained so as not to cause any extra stress and suffering. So don’t be surprised if this takes time, but it’s time well-spent. If you don’t take the time now to clean up your mind, when are you going to be able to have the time? It’s not like when you get older and weaker, closer to death, that suddenly you have lots of time and energy and ability to work on this. This is a problem you have to work on now, because now is the only time you know you’ve got. No one else can do this for you. You’re the one whose own lack of skill is causing the stress, and you can develop the skill to change that. So it throws responsibility on you, but it gives you power to change the balance of your mind. So with things changing in the mind, you want to take advantage of that so that you have the power to change things well. And it starts right here, learning how to observe your mind in the present moment as it centers on the breath, as it gathers around the breath. It’s like the waterhole out in the middle of a desert. If you want to see the animals in the desert, you don’t have to go very far, just stay by the waterhole. And in the course of the day, all the animals will have to come. Everything in your mind can be seen right here, right around the breath. So stake out this as your territory. Stay here as continually as you can. Even when you get up and go away from the meditation, try and have a sense of your body, the energy in the body, keeping it relaxed as you go through the day. So if anything unusual comes up in the mind, there’ll be a stirring in the breath, you’ll know there’s an issue, and you’ll be in a better position to deal with it. You’ll not just have to carry that stress and suffering around until the next time you meditate. If you can see what you’re doing to add to the stress right then, then you can drop it. This is why it’s good for us to practice alone like this, or out in an isolated place like this, because you don’t have the distraction of having to deal with other people at the same time. You can work on your own mind right now. You’ve got the time, you’ve got the opportunity. The weather’s a little warm, but the breeze is nice. You’re far away from your other responsibilities, so focus on this responsibility. As an opportunity to get more and more in charge of your own mind, take this fact of change and turn it into a power, your power to change things in the right direction.

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