Balancing the Mind (outside)

October 6, 2015

When you focus on the breath, you also have to focus on the mind to see if the mind will stay with the breath. You want to be alert to the state that your mind is in right now and to see if it’s out of balance. If it’s out of balance, you bring it back into balance. You try to fashion your state of the mind. You don’t just take whatever is there and accept that. You say, “Well, there’s something that I’m doing here that I’m doing wrong. What can I change?” So it brings the mind back into balance. The Buddha talks about the process of what he calls “fabrication” in Pali, at saṅkhāra, in Thai at saṅkhāna. This is how we approach the present moment. We’re constantly fashioning what comes in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. Sitting here with our eyes closed, we’re still fashioning things in the mind. We’re fashioning our breath, fashioning the state of mind. The problem is that we’re not conscious of what we’re doing. What we’re doing as we meditate is trying to get more conscious of this process of what we’re doing to fashion things, what we’re doing to fabricate things. We’re not totally making things up, but we’re taking the raw material that we’ve got and we turn it into an experience of the present moment. So if you find that the mind is out of balance, what do you do? First, you check to see what kind of imbalance it’s in. The Buddha says there are times when the mind needs to be gladdened. In other words, its energy level is down, it’s getting depressed and discouraged. That’s one kind of problem. There are other times when the mind needs to be steadied. In other words, it’s wandering all over the place, sometimes jumping all over the place, and sometimes it needs to be released. In other words, there’s something burdening it, something weighing it down. So once you’ve read what the problem is in the mind, then you look at what you can do with it. The first thing you want to do is go back to the breath, see if there’s something you can do with the breath that will help the mind get back into balance. For instance, if you’re feeling discouraged, go back and look at the breath and see if you can make the breath really comfortable. This is one of the reasons when the Buddha discusses the foundations of mindfulness, or the frames of reference, he starts with the body, then goes to feelings, and then goes to the mind. Because with the body, you’ve got the breath. You can change the breath to give rise to a feeling of pleasure. And that feeling of pleasure can have an effect on the mind. As the Buddha said, our state of mind depends on feelings and perceptions, so you change the feeling first. If that doesn’t work, then you can use what John Lee calls our “foraging places.” In his image, the breath is your home base, and this is your home topic of meditation. But there are other topics you can use that you can forage around in to get the food you need. For instance, if the mind is feeling the need to be gladdened, you think about things that make you glad, things in line with the mind. Some of the traditional themes are, one, thinking of your own generosity. In the times when you were generous in the past, you didn’t have to give anything. It wasn’t somebody’s birthday or Christmas or anything, but you just wanted to give. That means you gave them something. That reminds you of the goodness in your heart. That gives you energy. That gives you encouragement. Or you can think of the times in the past when you were virtuous. You didn’t have to be. You could have gotten away with something. You just didn’t want to do it. You stuck by your principles. That can give energy to the heart. Some other traditional topics are recollection of the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha. You can think about whatever you find inspiring in the Buddha’s life, the type of person he was in terms of his compassion, his wisdom, the purity of his actions. He had everything that anybody could possibly have in those days, and he’d realized that there was no essence to it. It was all going to leave him, and his life would have been in vain. There’s the possibility of finding something deathless, and if he didn’t take that possibility, he would have been embarrassed, he would have been ashamed. So he gave up everything else to find if there really is a deathless happiness. He found it. And then he shared it with everyone. He came back and taught his wife, taught his son, taught his parents, taught his friends. He taught his father and stepmother. Not just his family, he went out and taught the whole world for free. It’s very hard to find someone like that nowadays. He’s a teacher of this path we’re following. It’s good to be on a path like that. You think in these ways, it gives you energy to practice. Or you think about his Dhamma. After he awakened, he stayed experiencing the bliss of release for 49 days. As he said, the amount of things he learned in the course of that time was like all the leaves in a forest. But what he gave us was just a handful of leaves. But it was the handful that would be useful for us. He could have bragged about all the things he knew about this world and that world and the universe. All he wanted to talk about was what would be useful for each person coming to see him. That’s why we have the Dhamma. It focuses on the problem of why we’re suffering and what we can do to put an end to that. It’s an excellent Dhamma. It doesn’t ask us to believe in things that are opposed to reason. It’s a Dhamma that’s really worth putting into practice so we can gain our own benefit from it. Or you can think about the Sangha. In the Pali Canon, they have the stories of the monks and the nuns who became arahants. In many cases, they went through a lot of difficulties. Some were worse than you are. In a couple of cases where the people wanted to commit suicide, they were so depressed, so discouraged in their practice. And yet they were able to come to their senses, get to work, and gain release. They can do it. Why can’t you? So these are some themes to think about as you’re trying to lift the energy of your mind. If the problem goes in the other direction, you’ve got too much energy, your mind is like a ping-pong ball bouncing all over the place. Again, you can work with the breath. Think of the breath filling the whole body. Try to get your awareness to fill the whole body. If your mind has energy to think, try to think about the very subtle breath energies in places you don’t ordinarily look, like in the spaces between your fingers and the spaces between your toes, all the little nooks and crannies in the body that you don’t pay much attention to. Search those out. See how the breath is doing there. If the breath doesn’t help, there are other topics. There’s the topic of the fact that death could come at any time. Here we are on the land of earthquakes. A really big one could come. Here we’re not sitting in the cellar. The cellar can’t fall on us, but who knows what the trees could do? Or your own body. Your body is just prepared to die at any time. The very slightest little things, too cold, too hot, you get too sad, you get too happy, you laugh too much. People can die from all kinds of things. The Buddha has you reflect every morning when the sun rises. This could be your last time to see the sunrise. Are you ready to go? The answer usually is, “No, not yet.” Then you ask yourself, “What is it you’re still attached to? What’s holding the mind down?” Work on that. You don’t know how much time you have to do it, but you do know you have right now. When the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, it’s never because the present moment is a wonderful place. It’s always because the present moment is the only place that you can do the work that needs to be done, straightening out your mind. Again, when the sun sets, remind yourself this could be your last sunset. Are you ready to go? If not, get to work on what needs to be fixed in the mind. If you have a lot of energy to think, think about the 32 parts of the body, like we chatted last night. Just go through each of the parts. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh. Try to visualize each of those parts and where they are in your body right now. See if you can go down the whole list. If your mind has been thinking about these topics until it calms down, then you can go back to the breath. You can stay with the 32 parts of the body if you’d like, or you can go back to the breath. Either way, you’re with the Dhamma now, and that’s what counts. As for situations where the mind is burdened, usually this refers to the mind that’s burdened with sensual thoughts. Thoughts about pretty things to look at, nice things to listen to, nice things to smell, nice things to taste. The attachment here, the Buddha says, is not so much to the things, it’s to the plans we make around them. You can fantasize for hours about food. When the time comes to eat, it’s pretty quick. The taste of the food is that moment it’s in the mouth, and then it goes down into your throat, and then you don’t want to think about it. But you can think about it the next meal for hours again. We’re more attached to that thinking than to the thing. In other words, you can think about how, after you leave the retreat, there’s a nice restaurant nearby. Let’s check it out. You can plan what you’re going to order, and they say, “Well, no, not that. Maybe something else.” You can think about it for a long time. You actually get there, “Oh, the restaurant’s closed.” You say, “That’s okay, there are other restaurants.” And you can think about the next one. But if someone were to tell you, “You’re not allowed to think about your meal tonight,” you’d rebel, which shows that you’re more attached to the thinking than to the object. Look at these kinds of thoughts and learn how to see that there’s not much there, there’s not much substance. One of the Buddha’s images is of a dog chewing on a pile of bones where all the meat has been boiled away. There’s nothing but the bone, and the only taste the dog is getting out of the bone is a taste of its own saliva. That’s what you’re getting when you’re engaged in sensual thoughts. It’s just a taste of your own saliva. Is that something you want? Or you find yourself playing movies over and over again. “This person did that to me, that person did this to me.” Ask yourself, would you pay to see these movies? The acting is horrible, the script is horrible, and yet why do you keep going over these things? The whole point of this is to develop their perception that these things are not really worth it. You’d be much better off just coming back to the breath. So in all these techniques, you’re employing what the Buddha calls “mental fabrication,” in other words, feelings and perceptions to bring the mind back into a good shape, bring it back into balance, the state where you want it. In other words, developing feelings of pleasure around the breath so you don’t get so attracted to the pleasure of your thinking. Developing perceptions that either focus on how good it is to be meditating or on how worthless your other thoughts are. Learn to see them as nothing worth engaging you. In this way, you use feeling and perception to bring the mind into a state where it’s ready to do the work that needs to be done, watching itself, being clear about what’s going on in the present moment. As the Buddha said, “Ardent, alert, and mindful.” So as we meditate, we adjust not only the breath but also the mind. So that they can maintain a snug fit and work together seamlessly.

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