Basic Meditation

October 31, 2015

Every evening before we meditate, we chant the thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, to remind ourselves of our motivation for meditation. We want a happiness that is good for us and good for others, that doesn’t create any burdens for anyone at all. We want a happiness that’s true and lasting. It’s good to remind ourselves of this each time we meditate, because otherwise we tend to bring the issues of the day into the meditation, and they swell to fill up the entire hour. So we want to cut them off. We think of all living beings everywhere, get our minds around infinity for a little bit, so that when you start thinking about issues of the day, they seem awfully small. That allows the present moment to come to the fore, because the work we need to do to find the happiness we want is right here. Getting to know the mind in the present moment, to see how it moves, and when it moves, how it creates pleasure sometimes and how it creates pain other times, even though we want to create well-being with all our thoughts and all our actions. Still, we can end up creating a lot of suffering for ourselves and for others. So we need to watch the mind carefully. You have to watch it in the present moment. You can’t watch it in the past or in the future. So the breath is our anchor. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. The breath is very near to the mind. It’s through the breath that we have a sense of the body. We’re talking about breath here. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s the energy flow in the body that on one level allows the air to come in and out, and on more subtle levels animates the whole body. The sense that we have, what’s called proprioception, or a sense of the body we feel from within, starts with the movement of this energy. That’s where we want to get to know really well, because when we’re there, we’re very close to the mind. At the same time, we’re stepped out of the mind a little bit, so we’re not totally surrounded by thoughts. You’ve got a physical anchor here that allows you to step out of your thoughts. So try to get to know the breath. Watch it all the way in, watch it all the way out. It’s good to start with a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, both to energize the body and to get a sense of how the breathing feels. If long breathing feels good, deep breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Change the rhythm to shorter, more shallow, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Try to find what kind of rhythm and texture breathing feels good right now, and then see if you can stay with it. Find where the breath is most prominent, and think of holding that spot in your awareness like a bowl full of water. If you move around too much, it’ll disturb the water and it’ll come splashing out. So try to keep things balanced and just right, right here. And if you find yourself slipping off the breath, just get back on. Whatever it was that pulled you away, and you’ll find yourself right back in the breath. When you come back, reward yourself with an especially gratifying breath, something that feels really good deep down inside. The reason we work on this sense of comfort is because the mind will not stay in the present moment unless it has some sense of well-being here. And the breath is the most responsive part of the body. It’s one of the few processes that can be either automatic or it can be willed. And so it’s willed to be as comfortable and as soothing and as refreshing as we can. Energizing if you need energy, relaxing if you want to be relaxed. The breath has lots of variations. And as a meditation topic, it’s one of the best, because it’s with you everywhere. You have a few moments here, a few moments there. To be quiet, we can focus on the breath. You’ll find that you can get the breath so it feels really soothing, first in the torso and then as you begin to become more sensitive to the other breath energies in the body. You can think of that soothing, energizing, refreshing energy spreading out through your nervous system, down to the fingers, down to the toes, out to every pore. And you’re sitting here surrounded by good energy. As you go through the day and you’re feeling frazzled, stop and take a breath break. One way of getting a sense of the more subtle energies in the body is to consciously relax the body, starting around the fingers, then moving up through the hands and the arms, and starting with the toes, moving up the legs, up your back, up the neck, up around the head. As you scan the body in this way, notice if there’s any tension and allow it to relax. Move up, add more tension, allow it to relax. In fact, sometimes if you’re having trouble adjusting the breath or finding a breath that feels good, this is a good way to approach it. Drop the in and out breath from it and just go through the body and relax it. You come back to the in and out breath and you’ll find that it’s found a rhythm that feels really good. The more steadily you can stay here, the better it’ll be both for the body and for the mind. The body gets soothed and the mind’s given a good place to stay. As I said this morning, it’s like being the owner of a house. If you take good care of the house, it’ll be a good place to stay. It’ll provide you with shelter and comfort. If you don’t take care of the house and spend a lot of time outside, you lack the shelter and at the same time other things can move in. Rats and mice and other animals move in and they can start chewing up things in the house. In other words, greed, aversion, and delusion come in and make a mess of all the energy in your body. Then when you come back to the present moment, it doesn’t feel good, so you leave again. It’s like the owner coming back to the house and finding it full of all kinds of unpleasant animals and things. Rotting floorboards, broken pipes. You don’t want to live there, so you leave again. But still you don’t have any other shelter. What you’ve got to do is come in and clean up the house. Then you have a good place to stay. As the mind gets more at home here, in the present moment, then you can watch the mind more directly. See how, when a thought forms, what are the stages. And when the thought begins to turn on you, how does that happen? You can step out of the process of thought formations and observe it as an outsider. It’s like being in a movie theater. Our ordinary way of being in a theater is sitting in the darkness and seeing that big screen up ahead of us. And there are flashing lights on the screen, and we see it as an actual play, an actual event, an actual story. Our emotions get pulled in. Our sense of being there with the actress, with the characters, pulls us out of ourselves. We get pulled into the world of the movie. But if you were to go off to the side of the theater and watch from the side, what would you see? You’d see this beam of light flashing onto the screen with all these colors coming and going, and people sitting in the audience laughing and crying over the colors flashed on the screen. You can begin to see that a lot of emotion gets expended over just flashes of color. It’s the same in the mind. We’re in our thought worlds, and they have an awful lot of reality. But if you can pull off to the side and just watch the process, and this is how a thought forms, a little stirring right at the boundary between the body and the mind. At first it’s hard to tell whether it’s a physical stirring or a mental stirring, but then there’s a part of the mind that slaps a label on it and says, “Well, this is a thought about this.” And then you run with it. And you get into it. And it can lead you all kinds of places. Some thought worlds, of course, are useful and good, and others create a lot of suffering. And it’s good to be able to see that at the very early stages. So if it’s going to be a thought that’s going to cause suffering, if it’s not going to serve any purpose at all, you can let it go. You can pull out. But the best way to know the process of thought formation is, for the time being, not to let any other thoughts grab your attention. If you notice that it has, just drop it. If another thought has grabbed your attention, just drop it. Come back to the breath. Get to develop this skill of noticing that you’re in a thought world and you don’t want to be there. Get out and come back to the breath. This is why I said it’s good to have something that you’re focused on that’s not in the mind. It’s close to the mind, but it’s not in the mind. Because you have this place always to step back to. So work on these skills—staying with the breath, pulling yourself out of any distracting thoughts, allowing the breath to get more and more comfortable, more and more refreshing, so that you feel grounded here. In this way, you change the balance of power in the mind, your awareness, your alertness, and your desire for that happiness that’s special, i.e., doesn’t cause any harm to anyone. Get strengthened. And your other random desires, you don’t know where they’re going to take you, but they seem to have an awful lot of power. They get weakened. This is all to the good.

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