The Mind’s News Cycle

June 8, 2016

Feed the mind with some comfortable breath. Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. It might be longer than yesterday, or shorter. Heavier, lighter. Faster, slower. Deeper, more shallow. Get a sense of what the mind would like to feed on right now. Because if it doesn’t feed on the breath, it’s going to be feeding on something else. The mind has a whole array of food, and that’s inside the refrigerator, inside the storeroom. Often you can find it bringing things out, even right here where you’re trying to meditate. It comes out and says, “Well, enough of the breath. Let’s think about a little bit of greed right now, a little bit of anger.” It doesn’t use those terms, of course. Something comes up, a memory from the past, anticipation for tomorrow. And if your greed, aversion, and delusion get to feed on it, then they like it and they’ll try to push you in that direction. So even just getting the mind to settle down with the breath, you have to do some work with the other thoughts that are coming up in the mind. This is your beginning practice in discernment. Try to remind yourself of why these are not good thoughts to think. One of the arguments you can put up is, “Well, not right now. Some other time.” Of course, that leaves the seed right there. As soon as there’s a little bit of lapse in mindfulness, the seed will grow again. It’ll come right back. So it’s good to think a little bit about why it’s not good to get involved in these other things. Not only while you’re meditating, but at other times as well. And try to do that while you’re still with the breath. This is a good talent to develop. You’re doing a little bit of analysis, but you’re not leaving the breath at all. But you don’t want the analysis to be too long. Where the jugular is in that particular thought, and go right for the jugular. What’s the appeal of that thought of the past? Or what’s the appeal of thinking in the future? What does your mind tell itself about why this is a good thing to be thinking about? There are several layers of commentary going on inside. And if you can find which commentator is nudging things along, that’s good. And put a stop to it. And the best way to stop it is to see that you don’t really want to go along with it anymore. You’ve listened to it enough, you’ve seen the damage that it’s done. But all too often, our commentators on the mind are like the commentators on the news cycle, Sunday morning chat shows, or people whose advice about what they’re supposed to do, or what the United States should be doing, or what the world should be doing, has been disproven many, many times. Yet they still keep talking. They still keep bringing the same people back. Because it serves somebody’s interest. Well, it’s the same in the mind. The mind has its politics. Something’s getting fed by that particular commentator. Something’s feeding on it. And you want to see that. Sometimes it’ll come up and you’ll see it at an unexpected time. It’s not the case that no insight happens when you’re not looking for insight. Sometimes when you’re looking for insight, that’s when everything hides. It’s like children in a classroom. As long as the teacher’s in the room, everybody behaves. When the teacher leaves, that’s when they start running around. So you don’t have to tell yourself you’re going to gain insight into a particular problem. Just say, “I’m going to work with the mind right now. Keep it quiet. Whatever comes up that gets in the way, that’s the problem for today.” And use your ingenuity in cutting it through. Sometimes you’ll be surprised at the insight you gain. You suddenly see why you were feeding on that particular kind of thought, and what interest it served, and why you don’t want to have anything to do with that interest anymore. Then you can let it go. And if it comes back again, it’s either a case of that same old voice sneaking back, in which case you recognize that you can drop it. Other times it’s a different voice. As I said, there are many commentators on this news cycle. But don’t get discouraged. Just behead them when they show. As soon as you can see what they’re saying, and why they’re saying it, and what interest they’re serving, that’s when you can let it go. Then you get back to the breath. And this is the talent you need in order to deal with these things. When you’re working just on concentration, often the insights will be enough to cut away any plants that are growing in your path. You may not uproot them, but at least they’re cut down at the ground level so you can continue walking on the path. They don’t get in the way. But as the concentration gets deeper, and this talent you develop in noticing what’s getting in the way and going right for the jugular, that gets more subtle, it gets more perceptive. What you’re looking for is basically five things. And it’s good to keep these five things in mind. One, you want to see when these things come, and then you want to see when they go. And be on top of that. Because sometimes, say for instance, anger seems to come and stay for a long time, or lust or greed. But if you look at it carefully, you begin to realize it comes and then it goes. Then it comes back again and goes again, and then it comes back again. Part of the mind convinces itself that, “Yes, I’m still angry.” Sometimes this has to do with the hormones in your body. The first time you got angry, the hormones were released and they’re still doing their work. The anger goes, but you notice that the physical side of the anger is still there. And so you just bring back the old anger. “I must still be angry,” you tell yourself. But you’re very careful at seeing when the thought comes and when the thought goes, and leave the physical symptoms to be just physical. You can be aware of them, but you don’t have to interpret them as a sign that the anger is still there in the mind. Then you get a better chance of seeing what’s going on with the anger, in other words, why it comes and why it gets dropped, and what motivation you have for picking it up again. That’s the next step after you’ve seen the come and go. The next step is to see what’s the allure. Why does your mind like feeding on this? Is this the kind of food that you can eat out in the open and admit to yourself that you’re eating on it? Or is it the kind of food that you try to hide it even from yourself that you’re feeding on it? When I was a child, I used to eat all the time. For some reason, I really liked salt. My mother was worried about this, and she kept telling me not to eat salt. So, of course, what would I do? I’d take the salt shaker and I’d go behind the sofa and eat the salt there. Well, that’s the way a lot of the feeding of the mind is, trying to get out of the range of whoever’s in charge in the mind. So you want to see, “Why am I feeding on this?” Especially with the unskillful habits in the mind. It’s the kind of feeding you tend to hide from yourself. Which means that the best way to see it is to see it glancingly. In other words, you’ll catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of your eye. You’ll be looking at the breath, but then this will come up, and then you’ll see a particular thought or a side of this particular commentator that you hadn’t seen before. Who’s lying behind the commentator? What interests are being served? And again, the steadier your concentration, the more you’ll see. Now, this doesn’t mean that you have to wait until your concentration is really good. It’s good to get practice with whatever level of stillness you’ve got. As you’re protecting that stillness, you’ll see little things about the mind. The thoughts that have attracted you before. You clear them away, and then as you get deeper into concentration, you’ll see more of them. It’s like cutting the plant down that’s in the middle of the path, cutting it down closer and closer to the ground, and getting down into the ground. But to cut it, you also have to see not only the allure, but also the drawbacks. What is the pain? What is the used-up effort that doesn’t really give any profit, that goes with that particular thought? And see it really as a drawback. And learn how to see the allure and the drawback at the same time so you can compare them. One of our problems is that we tend to see the drawbacks without any consciousness of the allure, and so we wonder, “Why do I go for that?” And then you forget about the drawbacks and you go back for it. So you can put them together. You’re, in Ajahn Lee’s terms, a person with two eyes. And when you can see both sides, that’s when you can compare them. And there will come a point where you get dispassionate. This goes through the levels that were described in the sutta we were chanting just now. There’s disenchantment, which means basically you’ve had enough of that kind of food. And then there’s dispassion. You don’t want to create any more of that food for yourself to feed on. And that’s when things cease. That’s the feeding habit problem. But the feeding habit problem has its politics. Those Sunday morning commentators who’ve shown again and again and again they don’t know what they’re talking about, yet they seem to have lots of influence and lots of credence. It’s because they’re serving an interest that wants to keep them up there in front of people. Same in the mind. Your mind has its politics around its feeding, and you want to learn how to see through that. So the vested interest in your mind can be overthrown, and your genuine interest can come to the fore. Because with the dispassion, there’s an escape. That’s where freedom lies. And it’s for that freedom that we’re meditating.

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