Meditation Basics

July 13, 2016

We recite that chant on goodwill every night to remind ourselves of why we’re here meditating. We want a true happiness. We want a happiness that also doesn’t harm anyone else. That kind of happiness has to come from within. Because the happiness of the world usually involves you gaining something and somebody else has to lose it. Or they gain it, you lose it. But true happiness comes from within, from developing the resources in your mind. And that doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone at all. In fact, the more you develop these resources, the more you have to share. So always keep that in mind as you practice, that we’re here for the sake of true happiness. Things will get difficult sometimes because part of training the mind requires that you say no to a lot of its impulses. Then the mind will often put up resistance, and you have to put forth an effort. It’s a happiness that comes not just simply because things are pleasant, but because the mind can handle anything. That’s what part of the meditation is, to teach you how to handle whatever comes up in the mind so it doesn’t knock you off balance. So we start by focusing on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice how that feels. Notice where you feel it in the body. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it feels strained or uncomfortable, you can change the rhythm. Try shorter breathing or in-short-out-long, in-long-out-short, heavy, light, fast, slow, deeper, more shallow. Play with the breath for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. Or simply pose the thought in the mind each time you breathe in. What kind of breathing would feel good now for the body? And see how the body responds. When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it until it doesn’t feel good anymore. Because sometimes the needs of the body will change, and you want to be on top of that. If your mind wanders off, bring it right back. It follows the thought out. You don’t have to straighten out the thought. You don’t have to finish the thought. Just drop the thought, and you’ll find yourself right back at the breath. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good. If one breath feels good, follow it with another one. This is where the mind gets more and more inclined to want to stay with the breathing. Because you’re trying to make the breath your home base. You’re trying to put yourself in the present moment so you can observe the mind. And to observe the mind clearly, you have to be very still. It’s like the difference between running past a tree and standing still and watching the tree. If you want to see what animals or birds are in the tree, running past the tree will just give you a few vague notions. You don’t see anything clearly. But if you really want to know the tree, you have to be very still. So if you want to know the mind, you have to be very still in the present moment. And the breath is a good place to stay, because it does offer that possibility of comfort. And it’s always there. When we speak of breath here, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s also the flow of energy that goes to the body. The most blatant level is the energy that accompanies the in-and-out breath, that allows the air to come in to begin with and lets it go out. But as you get more sensitive to how the body feels here in the present moment, you’ll notice the breath-like sensations in different parts of the body, or simply an energy buzz in different parts of the body. That counts as breath as well. And you want to think of all the breath in the body as being coordinated, everything flows together well. If you notice there’s any tension or blockage in any part of the body, allow it to relax. Think of it dissolving away as you’re breathing right through it. We were chatting just now about right concentration. One of the features of right concentration is that you’re aware of the whole body. Your mind is centered in one spot, but it’s aware of the whole body. It’s like the candle here in front of the room. Its flame is in one spot, but its light fills the room. It’s focused, centered, but broad awareness like that. And wherever there’s a sense of ease with the breath, think of that flowing throughout the body as well. The larger your frame of reference here in the present moment, the more stable it’s going to be. If your concentration is focused on just one point, then as soon as it moves from that one point, it’s been shaken up. But if your frame of reference is the whole body, then you can notice things coming through your awareness, but your frame is still there. So think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and you’re there with the whole sensation of breathing in and breathing out. As you do this, you’re developing three qualities. One is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Right now you’re keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay focused on the breath. The second is alertness. This is your awareness of what you’re doing in the present moment and what results you’re getting from your actions. It’s not just anything coming up in the present. You want to notice, “What are my intentions right now? Where am I focusing the mind? Am I getting good results? How is the breath flowing in the body right now? How is my focus on the breath having an effect on the breath?” If this is something not quite what you want, then you develop the third quality, which is ardency. In other words, you try to really do this well. You put your whole heart into it. When you’re with the breath, it means you want to really stay here, keep it here. When you’ve wandered off, you want to bring it right back as quickly as you can. While you’re with the breath, to keep it here, you want to make it as comfortable as you can. There are things to do here. You’re not just hanging out in the present moment, idling, or just simply being with the present moment. You realize that your intention right now plays a role in shaping the present moment, so you want to have some good guidance. That’s what mindfulness is for. It reminds you of what you should be doing. Awareness watches what you’re doing, and then ardency is what tries to do it well. Use that potential for your ability to shape the present moment. Use it well. Mindfulness creates conditions in the mind where you really can understand your mind clearly, because the only way you’re going to be able to train the mind is if you understand it. It’s like training an animal. If you’re training a dog but you don’t understand dog psychology, it’s going to be hard. You’ll read the dog’s actions all the wrong way. But if you understand dog psychology, when the dog does this, it’s being cooperative. When it does that, it’s not being cooperative. Then you know how to read it. Then you can adjust your training accordingly. It’s the same with the mind. You have to learn how to read your mind. What does the mind need right now? It needs a place to settle down. So you provide that. If it’s getting a little bored, try to get more and more interested in what’s going on in the present moment. Explore what it means to have a sense of breath energy in different parts of the body. Make a survey to see what’s going on in the body. You’re not fully aware of them. It’s just a place where awareness hangs out for a bit and then it goes shooting out someplace else. We spend most of our time focused on the world outside. If there’s a screen in front of our faces, we go right into the screen. But here you’re trying to back up and back into your body. Be aware of the back. Be aware of the legs. Be aware of the arms. Have a sense that the energy is flowing well, that the blood is flowing well through the body. Take some interest in this because it’s going to have an impact on your health. The more comfortable it is to be in the present moment, the easier it is for the mind to stay here in the present moment. Just be careful that you don’t lose your focus on the breath and go wandering off after the sense of pleasure. The reason the pleasure is there is because you’re focused. The mind is not moving around too much. It’s not concocting a lot of thoughts. But if you lose your focus on the breath and focus on the pleasure, you’ve lost the cause of the concentration. You may stay here still, but you don’t know where you are, which doesn’t help. You want to be still but alert, like a person who has a job at a factory watching cloth go past. If there are any imperfections in the cloth, you want to stop the machinery right away. Well, to see the imperfections, you have to be very still. But you can’t doze off. You can’t get into a trance. You have to be present all the time. So when something comes up that’s not right, you can adjust it right away. So try to find this right balance of being still but alert. Settled but curious about the present moment. Because it’s not just the breath here in the present moment. There’s a lot of stuff the mind is doing right now. It has its intentions, and it has its little conversations in the background, saying, “Do this. Don’t do that. Do this. Don’t do that.” You have to be careful about which voices you listen to. Right now you’re listening to the voice that says, “Stay here.” We want the mind to be trained so we can understand it. Because the mind has a lot of power. It’s what shapes your life. It’s what makes the decisions as to what you’re going to do and say and think. Too often we just let those decisions happen willy-nilly. Here we want to make them more deliberately, with clear awareness of what we’re doing. So the shape we give to our lives is a good shape. Otherwise it’s pretty random. So take an interest here in the present moment, because everything that happens to shape your life is happening here in the present moment. Things in the past have already happened, and you can’t go back and change them. As for what’s going to happen in the future, it’s uncertain. But you do have the present moment. You have the opportunity to make choices in the present moment. So you want to be on top of them, to make sure that you’re making the choices that you want to make as well. So here’s an hour to get to know your mind in the present moment. Use the breath as a leash to keep it here in the present moment. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment, and you can make it a pleasant place to be. So even though parts of the mind want to wander off and say, “Oh, here’s a whole hour,” you can think about all kinds of things. You can say, “No, I’m going to think about the breath. I’m going to be with the breath, experience the breath, adjust to the breath.” Give the mind a place to settle down. Because it’s when it’s settled down that it can know itself. And it’s when it knows itself that you can take the most advantage of all the powers that the mind has to offer.

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