A User Manual for the Mind

August 3, 2016

Get your body in position. Sit straight, face forward, close your eyes. Put your hands on your lap, one hand on top of the other. And then get your mind in position. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the sensation of breathing. Focus your attention there. And if you feel it in many parts of the body, which you should, focus on the spot where it’s most prominent and see if it’s comfortable. If long breathing is comfortable, stick with it. If not, you can change. Take a breath shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Think of the spot where you’re focused as something you’re holding with cotton batting. Protect it very carefully and let the breath protect it as well. And see how long you can stay there. Other thoughts will come in the mind, but you don’t have to pay them any attention. Think of your mind as a large room. There may be conversations going on in different parts of the room, but you don’t have to get involved in all of them. You’ve got one conversation right here, your conversation of how you’re going to stay with the breath. If you do slip off to the other conversations, just drop them. You don’t have to tie them up or say anything intelligent in those conversations. Just drop the conversation and come back. No matter how interesting or fascinating or important the conversation may seem. It’s not what you want right now. We’re training the mind in a different kind of skill, the skill of observing itself. And we use the breath as a mirror for the mind, because it’s hard to observe the mind just on its own. But when you have an object like this to ground yourself in the present moment, then it’s a lot easier. When you notice the breath, you know that it’s there in the present moment because there’s no future breath or past breath you can watch. And when you have the breath as your point of reference, it’s a lot easier to see and understand the movements of the mind. It’s like lying on your back out on a large field. You look up at the sky and the clouds are there. And if there’s nothing on the ground against which you can measure their movement, you have no idea who they are, whether they’re moving north or south, because you lack a frame of reference or a point of reference. But if you do have a point of reference, like the top of a roof, telephone pole, or tree, then you can see, okay, the clouds are moving east, the clouds are moving west, how fast they’re going. It’s the same with the breath in the mind. The breath is your point of reference. And the fact that you’re trying to stay here gives you an idea of when the mind begins to move off. You may miss it and suddenly find yourself someplace else. But as soon as you realize you’ve dropped the breath, and, well, dropped whatever else it was that you were carried away by, you’re going to be back at the breath. Each time you come back, ask yourself what kind of breathing would be especially satisfying right now. This is one of the ways of making the present moment more interesting, is by playing with the breath, adjusting the breath. See what feels really good. Sometimes something will feel good for a while and then it won’t feel so good anymore. Well, you can change. But each time you’ve lost the breath, come back and ask yourself what would be especially gratifying. What parts of the body seem to be starved of breath energy or feel good if you breathe down into them? Because the breath isn’t just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy that goes through the nerves, goes through the muscles, goes through the blood vessels. And it’s this energy, actually, that allows the air to come in and out. But you notice that there’s a flow of energy everywhere in the body. If you get really sensitive to it, it’s already there. And you already have an awareness of it. The problem is that awareness is pushed back in the background, because you’re usually more interested in something else. So now you’re giving this awareness a chance to show itself, come more to the fore. Now, to stay here requires three qualities. The first is mindfulness, which is your ability to keep something in mind, your ability to remember. Sometimes you hear it defined as non-reactive awareness, or bare awareness, or non-judgmental awareness. The Buddha never defined it that way. In his terminology, it’s your ability to keep something in mind. Right now you’re trying to keep the breath in mind. That’s one quality. The second quality is alertness, watching what you’re actually doing. Again, you’re not just in the present moment to bathe in the present moment. You’re here with a purpose. You want to see what the mind is doing and what the results of its actions are. So you want to be alert to the fact when the mind is with the breath, and you want to be alert to when it’s not with the breath. When it’s not with the breath, you try to remind yourself that this is where you bring in mindfulness, and that, hey, this is not where you want to be. You want to be back at the breath. And the third quality you develop is ardency. You try to do this as well as you can. You put your whole heart into it. After all, it is your mind, and you want to understand your own mind. You want to understand it well, and you want to have the skills that are needed so you can watch it. To see when greed takes over, or anger takes over, or delusion takes over, we tend to get into these mental states without realizing the steps of how we do it. We don’t see the process. But if you can step back and be with the breath, then you can see these things as processes happening. Then you’re in a better position to choose which ones you want to go with and which ones you don’t. It’s like getting on a plane. If you just went down to the airport and just walked through any gate and just walked on any plane, who knows where you’d end up. But you want to check at the desk, “Is this the place where I want to go? Is this the company I want to go with?” Then you figure out, “Okay, this is the plane I want.” Then you can go there. You’re in a better position to get where you want to go, because you’re watching things carefully. You’re not just jumping into anything that comes past. So these are the three qualities we’re working on. Mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. And if you find yourself slipping away, one of the qualities is missing. But if you stay with the breath, and if there’s an inkling that you might want to move off the breath and try to breathe in a way that’s more comfortable, that’s part of your ardency coming in to make sure you really stay here. Ardency needs a lot of tricks in order to do its work well. One of them is learning how to work with the breath. Another is learning how to conceive of the breath in a way that makes it easier to stay here. Again, if you can think of it as energy flowing throughout the whole body, all the way out to the pores of the skin. It changes your relationship to the breath. You realize it’s all around you and it’s all through the body. This allows your awareness of the body to come to the fore. And the energies in the body are not working at cross-purposes. Everything seems to be in harmony inside. And it’s a lot easier to stay here. The mind feels soothed. The body feels refreshed. The more stability you can bring into this awareness of the present, the better position you’ll be to see the movements of the mind. And for the time being, the main movements you want to watch out for are the ones that would pull you away from the breath. But as your concentration develops and you settle into this large frame of awareness, i.e., the whole body, then you get to the point where you can see thoughts come and go and you’re not knocked off of them. In other words, you’ve got this frame of awareness here, and it’s solid. When the thoughts come in, you don’t jump at them, you watch them. And you can see, “This thought is coming from this kind of motivation and it’s going to go in this kind of direction.” Then you can choose. As the Buddha said, one of the skills that comes from meditation is learning how to think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. That’s basically two skills. One is learning how to turn off a thought when you realize that it’s not what you want. And the other skill is learning what kind of thoughts you really want to think. What do you think is worthwhile thinking? That’s a matter of values. The first one is a matter of technique. The second is a matter of values. The technique on its own won’t teach you the values, but it does make you more sensitive to the fact that there are a lot of things that you tend to like that are actually causing you a lot of stress and suffering. Then comes the point when you have to ask yourself, “Is it really worth going with those things?” A large part of the mind will say yes, because it’s been going along with those things all along. Many times, our society encourages certain types of thinking that are not really good for you. But everybody else thinks in those ways, and you figure, “Well, I’ve got to think in those ways, too.” When you meditate, it gives you a chance to step back from everybody else’s norms and ask yourself, “What’s really good for me? What kind of thinking is helpful to the mind? What makes the mind more solid? What makes the mind more reliable? What gives a greater sense of ease?” Then you can start sorting through your thoughts. As the Buddha said, he got on the path to awakening simply by sorting through his thoughts like this, seeing which kinds of thoughts were going to lead in an unskillful direction and which would go in a more skillful direction. Any thoughts that are obsessed with sensuality, obsessed with ignorance, obsessed with the ill will, obsessed with thinking thoughts of harm, you realize this is going to take you in a bad direction because you think these thoughts and they develop ruts in the mind, and then you start acting in line with them. There are thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, i.e., good will, desire for your true happiness, the happiness of others, and thoughts of harmlessness. Those are thoughts, he said, that you could actually encourage. Simply sitting around thinking all the time can get the mind tired, so there are times when you want the mind to rest. So allowing the mind to rest like this is like taking good care of your mind. Pull yourself out of thoughts and you have a place to rest, a place to soothe the body, soothe the mind. It’s like having a knife that you know how to take care of. You chop, chop, chop at things, and finally, after a while, you begin to realize that your knife is good for chopping some things and not for other things. But even with the things that it’s good for chopping, if you keep chopping all day long, the knife is going to get dull. You’ve got to stop chopping and start taking care of it. Sharpen the knife, bathe it in oil so it doesn’t develop ruts. Just put it in a safe place. And then when the time comes that you have to chop through something, it’s just one chop and that’s it. But if you just chop, chop, chop, chopping all day long, the knife gets dull and you can’t cut through anything at all. So taking care of the mind this way, you begin to sort things out inside, what thoughts are worth thinking, what thoughts are not worth thinking, and you have the skill to keep away from the ones that are not worth thinking. And you also have the skill of learning how to rest the mind. It starts out by thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath. But as the breath gets more and more comfortable, you get to the point where you’re just there with the sensation of breathing. It feels good. You don’t have to adjust very much. Just stay there with that focus on the well-being that comes with the breath. And the mind gets refreshed. It gets nourished. The knife gets sharpened. So these are some of the basic skills in learning how to take care of your own mind. We’re all born with minds, and it would be good if we had an owner’s manual that came along with them. That’s basically what the Buddhist teachings are. They’re kind of like a user’s manual. So see if you can master some of the basic techniques so that you will be more in charge of your mind, so that it’s not that your thoughts are running you, but you’re running your thoughts. You don’t want to be a slave to greed, aversion, and delusion, jealousy, and all the things you know are not really good for you. Use those skills to get yourself in a better position where you’re on top of those things instead of being under their thumb.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/160803_A_User_Manual_for_the_Mind.mp3>