Behind the Scenes Here & Now

February 1, 2017

We come into the breath because we want to see our minds. In one way, we see the mind all day long, but we don’t have the right perspective. We’re inside all the little worlds that the mind creates. And when you’re inside those worlds, you don’t see what’s behind them. It’s like that movie where they had created this false village, this false reality, for this one person to live in. And as long as he didn’t see what was going on behind the scenes, he believed that it was reality. So we’re here to get behind the scenes. This is why we focus on the breath. Because the present moment is actually what’s behind the scenes. When you get into a thought world, it’s like you’re in a different time period, in a different place. But when you’re with the breath, you’re here and you’re now. Here in the sense that the breath is the closest thing to the mind that you can focus on. It’s the element of the body, the property of the body, through which you know the body, through which you move the body. And it’s right here. It’s the closest thing you have to the body that you can be in contact with. And it’s very sensitive to the movements of the mind. So when you look into the breath, as Ajahn Lee said, it’s like looking into a mirror. So we want to make the mirror smooth, make it calm. Because this mirror is like a liquid surface. If there are any waves, things are going to be distorted. So try to keep things as calm as possible, coming in and going out. We’re also now, in the sense that you can’t watch a past breath, you can’t watch a future breath. As long as you’re with the breath, that gives you your anchor in the present moment. So when the mind is tempted to drift off into a thought world, the anchor pulls you back. And then you can see the thought world from outside. It’s like a bubble floating away. And when you’re outside of it, you can see the other mental factors that went into its creation. As the Buddha said, those thought worlds are what he would call “becoming.” And there’s a long list of factors that precede becoming. And it’s up to you, your habits, it’s up to your past ways of looking at things. When you look at dependent co-arising, you see it’s a long list of factors, but maybe one or two connections will be the ones that strike home with you. Seeing how, say, the act of attention, how you choose what you’re going to focus on and how you focus on it, the Buddha never talks about bare attention. There’s always a question behind it. There’s an intention behind it. And as long as you stay grounded in the present moment, you’re much more likely to see these things. So try to make this mirror of the mind, the mirror of the breath, as smooth as possible so you can see these things. Of course, you see them by getting the mind in a concentration, because the state of concentration is a kind of becoming itself. It has to be the desire, and then it has to be the way you work with the breath, the way you talk to yourself about the breath, the images you hold in mind. Like, what is your image of the breath right now? When you breathe in, what mental picture do you have of how the breath comes into the body, how it moves around? Can you change that image? And John Lee gives you lots of ideas for how you can think about the breath as energy entering the body in different spots, right at the middle of the chest, going down through the abdomen, or coming in at the navel and going up, coming into the tailbone and going up, coming into the tailbone and going down. There are lots of different ways you can imagine it. The purpose of that is, one, to gain a sense of how you can get the body into balance. Because the breath is already moving in different ways, the question is, is it moving well? Is it circulating enough so that you can sit here and not get numb in your legs or not have a pain in your knees? How do you imagine the breath? How do you picture the breath so that it brings things into balance? And as you’re doing this, you also see the power of perception, the power of these various kinds of fabrication. It’s like learning to be a good cook. You don’t do it just by reading the books. You have to go into the kitchen and just keep cooking and cooking and cooking, and then observe what you’re doing as you cook. So you begin to notice. When you put something in with this amount of heat, how does it react? When you have that amount of heat, how does it react? How do you learn to see when something is cooked just enough? In the same way, how do you figure out how much pressure should you put on the breath? How much should you give it some freedom just to move as it likes? How deep should the breathing be? How shallow? You learn these things by doing them. And in doing them, you also begin to see. This is how the mind shapes its experience in other ways as well, not just while you’re meditating. Sometimes you’ll see particular problems coming up that you have a certain tendency to hang on to certain ideas or hang on to certain sensations. Then you begin to realize, “Okay, this is a habit you’ve picked up from just the way you live. Here’s a way to undo the habit.” In other cases, it’s more an idea of simply seeing a perception coming up that you were holding in mind or that was lurking under the surface or was actually right here in the present moment, but you didn’t see it because you were looking someplace else. But when you sit here and meditate, these things come up. So you’re in the right spot and you’re at the right time, i.e., you’re right here, right now, at the breath. And so long as you’re staying with the breath, the breath is here, the breath is now. That’s when you get to see things happening in the mind. Otherwise, if you’re not here now, all you’re seeing are the shadows or the reflections or the waves that have been set out by past actions, which may give an accurate idea of what happened in the past but may not. It’s never for sure. If you really want to be for sure about things, you’ve got to watch them as they happen. This is why alertness is not just a general awareness of the present moment. It’s focused on what you’re doing right now. And the results you’re getting. And then whatever lessons you’ve learned from the past year, you remember to keep those in mind. That’s the mindfulness. The ardency is that you want to do this well. So those are the three qualities you bring here. Ardency, alertness, mindfulness. As the phrase goes, “Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world,” you don’t have any reference to the world outside at all. It’s you and the breath right here, the awareness and the breath right here, right now. As far as you’re concerned at the moment, the world out there is some other time, some other place. What’s right here, right now, is what’s going on in your mind. If you want to see it carefully, see it clearly, you’ve got to stay right here. Keep your focus right here. Don’t let the little thought world sort of coming out in the mind drag your focus away from the present moment. You want to stay behind the scenes here, so you can see how the mind shapes its experience. That’s what the real insight is. I was reading today a letter from someone who was talking about a conversation she’d had with a group of other people. One woman was talking about how she’d had this particular vision in her meditation. Somebody else was talking about how he’d had that image in his meditation. The person who was leading the discussion was telling about great visions, great images, the sign of high attainment. You don’t gain awakening in images and visions. Remember the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He had all those visions of his past lives. He had those visions of beings all over the universe dying, being reborn. But that wasn’t his awakening. He was seeing the workings of his mind as they worked around suffering, creating suffering in ignorance. He brought knowledge to the process of the workings of his mind. The suffering was ended. Right here is where the insight is going to happen. It’s simply a matter of being more and more sensitive to what’s happening right here, right now. So you don’t have to go anyplace else. You don’t have to think about anything else. Just notice what’s happening here, how things come, how things go, what you can do. What you can do to make skillful states arise and stay, what you can do to get rid of unskillful states and make sure they don’t come back. That’s the element of ardency that’s going to allow you to see things clearly. It connects with the direct thought and the evaluation of the concentration. You pose some questions and you watch. And it’s not just random questions. You pose questions with a purpose and then you change things with a purpose and see what happens. That’s how you really get to know the workings of the mind, by working them as you keep the mind here with the breath.

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