The Care & Feeding of the Mind (outdoors)

July 9, 2017

Okay, we’ve got the shade, we’ve got the breeze, we’ve got the breath, and you’ve got your awareness. We’ve got all the ingredients we need. It’s just a matter of putting them together. Start out with thoughts of goodwill to remind yourself why you’re here. You’re here for the sake of a genuine happiness, a harmless happiness. Where is that going to come from? It comes from your own actions. And where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. This is why we’re training the mind. Remind yourself of your motivation, because it’s your motivation that keeps you going. There are times when there are dry patches in the meditation, when it seems boring or it seems tedious. That’s when you have to lift your spirits. As the Buddha said, you look at your mind and you see whether it needs settling or gladdening. So right now, gladden the mind. It’s a little hot outside, but as I said, there is a breeze. So you’ve got all the conditions you need to focus in on the breath. There’s nothing else impinging on you right now. You have no other responsibilities. Whatever responsibilities you do have, you can put them aside. They can wait. Your mind is of primary importance. So you bring it to the breath. As you come to the breath, you have to be very meticulous. This is the hard part of the meditation. Because if you don’t pay very careful attention, if you’re not really on top of things as they happen, you can suddenly find yourself miles and miles away without realizing what happened. It’s as if someone came up behind you, put a big burlap sack over you, and picked you up and threw you off someplace else. You have no idea how you got there. When you drop that, you’ll be back at the breath. Next time, make sure that you are a little bit more careful to notice what are the warning signs that the mind is about to slip away. Try to make the breath as comfortable as you can as a way of keeping the mind interested here. If you have any chronic pains, think of how you can breathe that helps the pain. If you have any chronic illnesses, how can you breathe in a way that helps to heal the damage of the illness or even undercut the cause of the illness? There’s plenty to explore here. In Asia, there’s a whole system of medicine built around the idea that the properties of the body for a healthy body need to be in balance. If there’s an imbalance, there’s going to be an illness. So the way to treat any illness is to try to bring things back into balance. It’s the breath that is your balancing property. Think of a John Lee. When he discovered this particular way of dealing with the breath, it was after he’d had a heart attack. He was up in the forest of Chiang Mai, three days’ walk away from the nearest road. No medicine, nobody to help him, and he had a heart attack. So what did he do? He used the breath as his medicine, seeing how the different ways of the breathing could have a good impact on the body. So whatever imbalances you have in the body, think of how to use the breath to bring things back into balance. If things are too heavy, think of a breath that’s energizing and enlightening. If you’re too lightheaded, try to think of that property of earth. The body is filled with earth. Let that be your ballast. Let that ground you. As you explore these issues, you begin to realize that you’ve developed concentration without even thinking about concentration. This is a big problem with a lot of people. They want jhana, so they keep thinking about jhana, jhana, jhana, jhana. Well, jhana is not the topic of concentration. Jhana is what happens to the mind as you focus on something like the breath. You just want to get absorbed, interested. So whatever way you have of gladdening the mind, use that now. If the mind is shooting all over the place, that’s when you want to steady the mind. That’s one of the reasons why you don’t want to follow a mind that’s scattered everywhere. One of the topics the Buddha has you think about is the fact that someday you’re going to die, and the difference between whether you’re going to suffer then or not suffer then is going to depend on the state of your mind—how the mind handles pain, how the mind handles loss, how the mind handles all the difficult emotions that are going to come up at that time. If you haven’t been trained, they’ll take you and toss you off someplace else. If the mind is well-trained, it can stay solidly with one object. Then when the time comes to leave, you can tell yourself, “Don’t go with anything that’s going to be disturbing.” As the Buddha said, when someone is about to die, you remind them that they shouldn’t be worried about anything they’re leaving behind. Not worried about where they’re going, because no matter how much you’re worried, it’s not going to be able to make any difference now. What you should be concerned with is the state of your mind, because the state of the mind is what carries over. Thinking that thought can help ground you. In this way, you learn some of the skills of the care and feeding of the mind. We spend most of our days not paying too much attention to the state of the mind because we’re paying attention to other things, our responsibilities outside. When we have a little bit of free time, we think about some entertainment, where we can have some relaxation. That partly takes care of the problems of the mind, but sometimes the relaxation and entertainment can actually be bad for the mind. So here, doing something that’s actually good for the mind is in addition to a right to rest, you’re developing useful qualities like mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind; alertness, which is watching what’s going on, what you’re doing right now and the results of what you’re doing; and ardency, which is the desire to do this well, the effort and the meticulousness to do this well. The quality of meticulousness is what makes the difference between a mind that’s just wandering around and coming back to the breath occasionally, and then wandering off again, and a mind that really is with the breath continually, gathering strength, gathering nourishment, coming out of the meditation totally refreshed. That refreshment has to come from some work. The extent to which you’re monitoring the mind and noticing the slightest little things that threaten to pull you away. And you have good ways of sidestepping those things, or counteracting them, or blocking them, so the mind does not get pulled away. What usually happens is you’ve been with the breath for a bit and then part of the mind says, “Okay, that’s enough of that. Let’s try something else.” And it’s just a part. It’s just a whispering around the edges of your awareness. And a little decision is made, “Okay, the next chance we get we’re going to go.” And then you pretend like the decision was not made. This is why you can be deceived by your own mind. So you’ve got to be careful to watch. Anything that threatens to move off someplace else, you’ve got to zap it immediately. We’re not going anywhere, not even the least little bit. It’s like the old story of the camel in the tent. The camel’s outside in the dust storm and it sticks its nose into the tent saying, “Please, please, please, can I at least keep my nose in the tent so sand doesn’t get into my nose?” And people feel sorry for the camel and then say, “Okay.” And then gradually, bit by bit, without their realizing it, the camel moves his whole snout in, then his whole head, and ultimately the tent is filled with camel and there’s no place where the people can stay. That’s what happens with your meditation, although it starts out gradually, but there comes a point where it just swoops right in and you’re off someplace else. If you find that happening, well, just drop whatever it is and come back and be resolved. As I said, the next time around you’re going to watch for the warning signs. Because in this process of the care and feeding of the mind, of course, who’s doing the care and feeding? The mind is caring for itself and feeding itself, which means part of the mind gets nourished and another part has to do the work. Particularly in the beginning, this is what the Buddha calls “directed thought and evaluation.” In other words, you’ve got to direct your thoughts to the breath and then direct your thoughts back to the mind. And if there’s any imbalance or anything wrong, then you have to evaluate, “How am I going to bring this into balance?” So in the beginning, you have to think about this. Think of it as a puzzle, as a riddle that you’re going to work on. How do I get the mind to settle down? How do I get it to want to settle down and stay there? And remind yourself there are three big issues. There’s the body, and then there are the feelings, and then there’s your awareness. Are the elements in the body okay? By the word “elements” here, we’re not talking about the chemical elements so much as your basic properties that make up your sense of having a body sitting right here. Classically, there are four. There’s what they call the earth element, which is the solidity; the water element, which is the coolness; the fire element, which is the warmth; and then the breath element, or the wind element, which is the sense of energy moving around. And again, ask yourself, “Are these things in balance or out of balance?” If you find that you’re too hot, like you’re hot right now because of the heat outside, ask yourself, “Where is the coolest spot in the body?” Focus your attention there, because some spots will be cooler than others. Focus your attention there and allow that sense of coolness to spread out from that spot. And the same with the other properties. If you’ve got too much of one, focus your attention on the opposite. The opposite of heat, of course, is coolness. The opposite of solidity is the energy. Too much energy, as I said, you’re going to be lightheaded, dizzy. Too much solidity and the mind is going to be torpid. It’s going to be hard to breathe. It feels like the whole body is made out of iron. And just the briefest effort to breathe feels like a real effort. When that happens, think of the breath not so much as something that’s trying to be squeezed into the solid parts of the body. Think of the breath as being prior. It’s your initial experience of the body, the sense of energy. After all, energy can go through everything. John Lee’s image is of nuclear energy that can penetrate even mountains. Think of your body being made up of atoms, and the atoms themselves are made up of mostly space. So there’s plenty of room for the breath to move through. You don’t have to force it. It helps you to overcome that sense of heaviness that can sometimes get unpleasant when you sit there. Those are the issues of the body. But in particular, they’re going to be the issues of the breath. It’s a feeling like the breath is flowing smoothly because this connects with the next big issue, which are the feelings. You want to have a feeling of ease. There may be pains in different parts of the body, but don’t let them deter you. Work around them. Think of how you’re going to inhabit every place but the pain, and you’re going to relax everything but the pain, and allow the breath energy to flow. As you stay alert to the breath in this way, a sense of well-being comes up. It may not be much to begin with, but you take care of it, in the same way as when you have a child. A little baby child is a little lot of trouble in the very beginning, and you sometimes ask yourself, “Why did I want this?” But as you look after the child, it’ll grow, and the child becomes more and more self-reliant. Finally, you can put down your concerns about the child because the child can look after itself. It’s the same way with a concentration. In the beginning, it’s going to be a struggle, and there are going to be pains here and there. But as you look after the little sense of well-being that you can create, it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. That way it becomes easier to settle down. Then finally, there’s your awareness. Is your awareness clearly here, or are there bits and pieces of it thinking about things someplace else? One of the reasons why, when we meditate up in the sala, we have chants beforehand is to help cut off a lot of the things that we normally get entangled with in the course of the meditation. You think about this person, the other person, well, we have the meditation on goodwill. You have goodwill for everybody. For people who you can’t stand, we have some equanimity at least for them. When you think about issues out in the world, your responsibilities out there, think about that chant where the Buddha says that the world is swept away. No matter how carefully you look after things outside, there will come a point where it gets swept away. This doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t make an effort when you have responsibilities, but it does mean that while you’re sitting right here, your attitude should be, “I want something that’s more solid than that, and the only place I’m going to find it is here in the breath.” This way you cut away a lot of the issues that the mind has. So here are three main areas that you have to care for—body, feelings, mind. In the beginning, you’re checking these things out. It’s like a mother hen checking out all her baby chicks, running around, running around, running around. You begin to wonder, “When am I going to be able to settle down?” But as you take care of these issues one by one by one, the mind has less and less to distract it, fewer and fewer concerns, and it finally can settle down. And when it settles down this time, it’s going to be able to stay because you’ve taken care of the issues that otherwise would get it stirred up. So this is a very special skill, the skill for the care and feeding of your mind. It’s a skill you want to be able to take with you wherever you go, even in times when you don’t have a nice breeze around you, a lot of quiet around you. You can still look after the mind, and to look after the mind, you look after these three things. The first is the shape of your body. In other words, does it feel balanced inside? How about the feelings? Can you find a feeling of well-being someplace by the way you breathe? And then you bring your awareness there to remind yourself that it’s a worthwhile thing to be doing this. This is a skill that’s going to carry you through a lot of difficulties that other skills in the world can’t help you at all. In Thailand, they have a tradition of handing out dharma books at funerals. Often there’ll be a little biography of the person who passed away, and the biographies all tend to follow the same pattern. The person was born, had an education, got married, had kids. In the beginning there were a few little signs of illness, and the doctors were really good at taking care of it, and then this illness got worse and worse and worse, but the doctors were still very good. But then there came a day when the doctors couldn’t help anymore. When you reach that part of the biography, you always realize, “Gee, what if that’s me?” Here I am in the hospital entrusting myself to the doctors, and the doctors say, “Well, that’s all we can do.” Where are you going to turn if you don’t have your own internal skills? If you do have those skills, there’s nothing to fear, because you’ve practiced all the skills you need for keeping the mind under control. Even when the elements of the body are really out of balance, if you’ve had some good practice with the mind, as you get more and more skillful at this, you begin to realize you can get the mind to settle down even when the body is imbalanced, even when there’s pain in the body. Because at that point you’ve learned to see that these three areas—body, feelings, and mind—really are separate. They may occupy the same space right here, but they really are separate things. And when you’ve been with them long enough so that they separate on their own, the same way that oil and vinegar separate out after you’ve mixed them, if you let the bottle stand long enough, if you stay long enough with your body here in the present moment, feelings, body, and mind will separate out. And then when the time comes for them to really leave one another, the mind is not going to be put to any difficulty, because it’s used to being separate. It’s used to being able to take care of itself. So here we have a whole hour to care for the mind, to feed the mind with a sense of well-being, to heal its wounds, to heal its illnesses. So at the end of the hour you come out not only refreshed, but also equipped with new skills—skills you can take with you.

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