Just Right

August 6, 2017

Focus on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to sort of air things out in the body. And then let the breath find a rhythm that feels good, what feels just right for right now. This principle of “just right” is an important part of the path. A lot of the Thaiajans make the point that when the Buddha’s talking about right view, right resolve, all the way through right concentration, the word “right” there can also mean “just right.” In the same way that when we’re talking about the middle path or the middle way, it’s not a middling way. With a little bit of pain, a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of effort, a little bit of relaxation, it’s approaching everything in a way that’s appropriate for the situation. Sometimes to get the mind to settle down, you don’t have to do much thinking. Think a little bit about how you’d like to get the mind away from its ordinary preoccupations and it’s ready to settle down. The breath feels comfortable, everything is at ease, not too much trouble. Other times it requires more thought. You have to think more strategically. So you do what’s necessary. One of the Thaiajans, Ajahn Mahaprabhu, says it’s the difference between a tree out in the middle of a field and a tree in the forest. If you want to cut the tree down, if it’s out in the middle of a field, it’s pretty easy. There are no entanglements. You can decide which direction you want it to fall. You cut it so it falls in that direction, and there you are. With trees in the forest, though, many times their branches are entangled with the branches of other trees. And you have to be very careful about which direction you want it to fall so it doesn’t land on another tree. So you have to cut this branch, cut that branch, use some strategy. And this is a matter of individual temperament, and also it’s a matter of one day into the next. Some days the mind is ready to settle down, other days it’s not. So notice how your mind is tonight, and figure out what needs to be done. You might pay attention to how you conceive of the breath, or in the Buddhist terms, what your perception of the breath is. It’s useful to know Ajahn Lee’s analysis of the breath. It’s not just the in-and-out breath, but there are also breath energies that are there in the body. In fact, it’s because of the breath energy already there that the air can come in and go out. And so there’s an energy that starts inside. That’s nothing you have to pull in from outside. It’s already there. It’s simply a matter of letting it do its work, if you perceive the breath that way. And also perceive the breath as the energy flowing through all the nerves, all the blood vessels, all the way out through the pores of the skin. You can think of the body as a big sponge. As you breathe in, energy can flow in from any direction. Then you let it bathe you. You hold these perceptions in mind that make it easier to settle down. Now, these perceptions may not work for you, but you can ask yourself, “Well, what perceptions would work?” And you have to experiment a bit. This falls in line with the Buddhist teachings on the causes for suffering. Some of them you can deal with simply by watching them. In other words, the things that the mind thinks and the mind gets away with thinking them because you’re not paying much attention, but they’re there in the background whispering subliminal messages that flash on the screen of your awareness. But if you look at them carefully, you realize that they don’t really deserve any credence, and you can let them go. It’s not much trouble. Others you have to work with. You can look at them and they just stare right back at you. That’s when you have to exert yourself. The Buddha talks about when you’re meditating, there are three activities. He compares them to the activities of a goldsmith. Sometimes the goldsmith takes the gold and puts it in the fire. Sometimes he brings it out and he blows on it. And other times he just looks at it, examines it, so he can figure out what to do next. In the same way, with meditation, sometimes you have to exert some extra effort. That would be like putting the gold in the fire. Other times you blow on it, you cool things down. That’s focusing on just staying in one place. And then the other times when you watch it, that’s watching with equanimity. He said if you did just one thing, if you just sat there and watched it or just put the gold in the furnace all the time, you wouldn’t get what you wanted out of it. So you have to figure out, right now, is this a time to put some extra effort into analyzing things and figuring them out, or is this a time to watch? Or is this just a time to tell yourself, “Okay, just be still.” That’s the same with dealing with the breath. There are times when you’re dealing with the breath you do have to exert some pressure on it. Other times it gets counterproductive and you have to leave it be. It’s all a matter of time and place, having a sense of that. And that comes with time. This is why we practice. We do it again and again and again. And as you do that, then you see things in the mind, you see things in the breath you didn’t see before. It’s like Mark Twain learning about going up in a pyramid, and up and down the Mississippi River. Originally he was overcome by how many different bends there were in the river and how you had to know every single bend, because you were a pilot on a steamboat. But then as he went up and down the river many times, he began to read it. And then he could see slight differences in the river, which were important when you’re steering a boat. When the current was high, when the current was low, when there were new sandbars here and there, he’d notice them because he’d been there many, many times. It’s the same with us. If you want to understand the mind, understand the breath, you have to do this again and again and again. And that’s how you get your sense of a feel for the breath, a feel for your own mind. Sometimes when you focus in the middle of the body, you spread your awareness and everything is fine. Other times you have to go through the body, section by section, very carefully, releasing tension here, releasing tension there, so that things will flow. And then you’re just going to back into the body. We have the sense that our mind is like a bird perched on our shoulders, looking through our eyes. And then as we think of the other parts of the body, it’s our eyes that are going to develop the body. That’s another perception you want to change. There’s already part of you that’s in your hand that knows your hand. There’s part of you in your arm that knows your arm. All the parts of the body have an awareness inside them, and that’s what you want to get in touch with. This more focused awareness that we relate to the eyes, you can let that rest. We’re trying to develop a whole body awareness so you’re aware of the whole body all the way down to the toes, all throughout the in-breath, all throughout the out-breath. You’re trying to bring three things together—your awareness, the body, and a feeling of well-being. The breath helps to cultivate that feeling of well-being. Sometimes you have the sense that your awareness fills the body before the breath does, and sometimes you have the sense that the breath is leading the way. This will vary from sit to sit. But what matters is that you have the patience to watch things and then to notice when it’s the time to watch, when it’s the time to put forth extra effort, and when it’s the time to just really be still. And as you combine all these activities, then concentration develops, and it becomes a concentration that can give rise to discernment. Because the discernment sometimes will come while you’re trying to do something, sometimes it’ll come while you’re simply watching, and sometimes it’ll happen when you’re coming in and out of just being very focused. And particularly the discernment that comes from figuring out how to get a recalcitrant mind down on the days when it just does not want to settle down. It’s carrying too much from the day, you hear it’s too sluggish or it’s too worked up. Like the strategy of the person cutting the tree, you have to use some discernment in order to get the mind down, to figure out what works and what doesn’t. That gives you some insight into the way the mind creates its own sense of reality and what you can do to change that. Other times the discernment comes after the mind has settled down and it’s been calm. When you come out, you see the mind picking up a concern, and automatically there’s some stress. Or sometimes just looking at something, there’s stress in the looking. So as you do these three things, you put forth effort, you watch, and you get the mind still. As you find a balance among them, you’re going to learn an awful lot about the mind. At the same time, you develop skill. There are philosophers who say we learn by doing, and the Buddha was one of the people who would agree with them. So you learn a lot about the mind by trying to get it to stay with the breath. You’ll learn about the breath too, but the most important thing, of course, are the things you’ll learn about the mind. So keep at it again and again and again. And things that are not clear will work themselves out if you make a point of being observant and gain a sense of where are the good places to look.

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