Working at Resting

August 27, 2017

Okay, let’s close our eyes, watch the breath, and watch the mind watching the breath. In other words, you need to be alert to see what you’re doing. We are getting the mind to rest, but at the same time we’re doing work, trying to clean out the mind. It’s like cleaning out the house. It’s just that this work is very quiet. Physically, it looks like you’re not doing anything at all. There’s a passage in the Canon where there’s a young woman who likes to put food in the bowls of the monks, and her father’s complaining, “What are you feeding monks for? They don’t do any work at all.” And she says, “No, they do the highest work. They’re getting rid of greed, getting rid of aversion, getting rid of delusion.” And you look at the world, and why is the world in turmoil? It’s because of greed, aversion, and delusion. So if you want to straighten out the world, you have to turn around and straighten out your mind. And as Ajahn Swat would often say, this is the highest work. So it requires that you be alert at the same time that the mind is resting. If you just rest, then you just fall asleep. So you want to be still, but you want to be very careful to watch after even the slightest movements of the mind so that your stillness is protected. It becomes the kind of stillness that allows you to understand the mind better. It’s like the stillness of any observer. Like a person in a factory who has to watch the cloth go by to make sure there are no problems with the cloth. You have to sit very, very still so you make sure you see everything. But you also have to be alert all the way through. You can’t blink. You can’t let your mind wander. Or like a potter. I was watching a potter one time in Thailand, and as he was putting a lump of clay on the wheel and then forming it into a pot, you really could feel how strong his concentration was. I mentioned that to him. You really do have to have good concentration. He said, “Yes, your mind has to be stock still. If you want the pot to come out right.” So try to make your mind as still as possible with the breath. What we want is a state of mind that is centered but broad, that fills the whole body, and stays right there with that state of alertness, so that whatever comes up anywhere, you know it immediately. It’s like a spider on a web. The spider is totally attuned to the web, so the slightest disturbance anywhere on the web, the spider runs and checks it out. If it’s a fly or whatever, it takes care of it and then it goes back to its original spot and then stays alert again. Sensitive and alert, but still. So think of the breath energy filling the whole body as you breathe in. The breath comes in and out every pore. We can think of the breath energy instead of coming into the body. Remember, that’s the energy flow in the body that’s bringing the air into the body. That energy flow actually starts in the body. When the in-breath starts, where in the body does it start? It might be down around the diaphragm, down around the stomach and the chest. Allow that area of the body to have its freedom. So you can breathe and take care of all the needs of the body. Allow there to be a sense of ease around that. Think of the sense of ease spreading around. That helps affirm the full awareness of the body, fills it with good energy. Then watch it to see whatever may come up. This is where the work is. It’s work in getting the mind to settle down and keeping it there. The sense of ease that comes, that’s the byproduct. That’s what you can rest with. But just be careful not to forget the breath. Just go for the ease. If you do, your concentration begins to lose its focus. So we’re working in the ease. It’s like working at home. You don’t have to dress up, but you do want to do a good job. So you can be comfortable and working at the same time to see when something comes up in the mind. Why is it coming up? If a thought of lust or desire or aversion comes up in the mind and part of the mind wants to go with it, you have to ask why. Where are you going to get out of that? Don’t you have something good right here with the breath? The mind feels a lack in the present moment and wants to make up for the lack. But if you have no sense of lack, but then the mind still follows its own habits, you can ask yourself, “Why go?” You’re in a much more powerful position to say no to any thoughts that would go running around. Just keep watch. Keep watch. This is where patience comes into the practice. You can never know ahead of time when an insight is going to arise, but you want to be in the right place. When the insight arises, learn how to use it well. If the insight arises but it doesn’t seem to have any immediate use, just let it go. Insights like that are like the golden eggs in fairy tales. If you give it away, or make good use of it, then you’ve gained something from the goal. But if you try to hold on to it, then it just turns into ashes. In other words, you hold on to the insight and it turns into just memories, which may or may not be appropriate to when you start remembering them. So instead of trying to hold on to the golden eggs, just make sure the goose that lays the golden eggs is in good shape. In other words, the stillness of the mind, the sharpness of your alertness. Keep these things strong. So it’ll be right there when another golden egg comes. And you’ll be able to figure out more quickly how to make the best use out of it. In this way we are resting, but we’re working at the same time. But as I said, it’s good work. Because if this work doesn’t get done, the world is going to continue to be a mess. No matter how much you try to straighten things out outside, as long as there’s greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind, they’re going to ruin things. No matter how good the situation is going to be, you won’t have a sense of enough, you won’t have a sense of satisfaction. Because there’s still this gaping hole in the mind that always wants more, always wants more. But if you can turn around and take care of that, then the question of what’s going on in the world outside, that’s not a problem anymore. In other words, it doesn’t weigh the mind down. You’re able to look after yourself, and because you’re able to look after yourself, you’re able to look after yourself with ease. Whatever extra energy you have, you’re happy to share. So the benefits of this work are not only for you, they’re for the people around you as well. So as you sit here, don’t think of the work you’ve left behind or the work you’re going to pick up after you leave the meditation. And above all, don’t think of the meditation as a waste of time. You’re doing the important work. The work of the world out there never gets done. So you can’t wait until the work out there is done before you meditate. You’ve got to meditate in the midst of the work, remembering that this is good work, too. It’s the best work. The fact that we have the opportunity to do this is a special opportunity. So appreciate that and make the most of it. you

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