Shaping Your Life

October 18, 2017

Start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Think of the breath going all the way down the body. And as long as long breathing feels good, keep it up. When you get tired of long breathing, you could change. Make it more shallow, lighter, shorter. Faster, slower, whatever way you would like to breathe is perfectly fine. And don’t be afraid to adjust the breath. One of the terms the Bodhi uses for the breath is bodily fabrication. The word “fabrication” here means something you do with intention, and there is an intentional element in how you breathe. So to understand that, to make the most of it, consciously play with it. To gain a sense of what kind of breathing feels good now, to sensitize yourself to the body so the mind would be willing to settle in. All too often it’s like an uncomfortable guest in the body. It comes for a while and then goes away. It comes in for a part of the body. And then it goes away again. We want to settle in. We want to settle into the whole body. We want to fully occupy your body, all the way down to your toes. The more the range of your awareness is here in the body, the less likely it’ll be to slip off to the past or the future. And part of staying here with the whole body is to figure out a way to make the whole body feel comfortable. So you start with the breath. Find the part of the body that you can exert your most control over, you can have the most influence on it, and see what you want to explore. What kind of influence can you have? We’re trying to bring three things together here. Your body, your awareness, and a feeling of pleasure that can permeate through the body. The pleasure is what unites the body and the mind for the time being. It makes it easy to stay here. These are three of the frames of reference that the Buddha has you think about as you’re meditating. Body, feeling, mind. Try to bring them together. Remember to bring them together. That’s mindfulness. Try to remember to stay together when you get them together. Then there’s a quality of alertness that watches what you’re doing, to see how it’s going. And the third quality is ardency. You try to do this well. For the time being, there’s nothing else you have to do in the world. You have no other responsibilities. But you are responsible for this, the state of your mind in the present moment. That, too, is something that takes a little getting used to. Usually we let the mind just do whatever it wants to do. We don’t take on any mood at all. But here you want to exert some control, without being a control freak. How do you exert control in a way that the mind is happy to stay here? That’s why we explore the breath. As you get more sensitive to how it feels inside, the mind begins to melt into the body. It has a greater sense of trust being here. Why do we want to be here? Because we’re shaping our lives through our actions, through our intentions, and we want to see that process in action so we can do it well. And settling down with the breath gives you some hands-on experience of doing that. And the more you settle down, the more the mind has a sense of stillness, the more clearly you’ll see these processes. Both the processes of getting the mind into meditation, getting it into concentration, and also the processes that would lead out, the things that would pull you away. You want to see these clearly so that you can do them well. Because this is nothing anyone else can do for you. Introductions to Buddhism are little pamphlets. I’m struck by a strange paradox. They start off by saying that Buddhism is a religion of self-reliance, and then further on they say, “Well, actually, there is no self.” They’re wrong about the second part, but they’re right about the first. We meditate to do things that nobody else can do for us. The Buddha gives instructions, the great Ajahn Chah gives instructions, the forest tradition gives instructions. The point is how to do things, questions about what to look for, so you’re not totally set adrift. But it does depend on you to actually do the work. How you relate to your body from the inside, how you relate to your mind from the inside, is something only you can do. And it’s in that area where the big problem is. We tend to do this with very little skill, with very little awareness. Little knowledge of what we’re doing. And as a result, we tend to create a lot of suffering, totally unnecessary suffering. Sometimes it’s heavy suffering. Sometimes it’s just stress. The Pali word dukkha can cover all kinds of things, from just disturbance to stress through heavy suffering. But whatever the level, there are things that we do that create this, and nobody wants to create these things. Everything we do, say, and think is for the sake of well-being. And here we are creating suffering. The cause of the suffering is inside, but fortunately the cure is inside as well. But that also means, as I said, that nobody else can do this work for you. Nobody can get into your awareness of how it feels like to be in your body and to watch the thoughts in your mind. They can take MRIs and they will never see a thought the way you see it. So it’s like you’re in a separate chamber and someone is speaking through the window, saying, “Do this, do this, do this.” And you have to decide, can you trust those instructions? In some cases you give them a try, and they seem to work, so you try a little bit more, a little bit more. But again, you have to decide which instructions you’re going to take, who you’re going to trust. Then you also have to interpret what you’re hearing. So a lot of this does depend on you. It places an emphasis on being observant, watching what’s working and what’s not working, and also using some ingenuity. You gain some instructions and they don’t quite work. It’s like getting a new shirt. It doesn’t quite fit, but you have sewing skills. So you can take the shirt apart a little bit and put it back together again in a way that fits. So you get the basic instructions and you play with them. And train yourself to be a better judge of what’s working and what’s not. This quality of alertness is really important so you can see clearly what you’re doing. The Buddhist prerequisite for a student is “Let someone come who is observant and no deceiver, and I will teach that person the Dhamma.” You have to clearly observe what you’re doing, clearly observe the results of what you’re doing, and be honest with yourself about what you’re doing and the results. With those two qualities, you become more reliable. Then there’s an exercise. The exercise of being with the breath is something that exercises those qualities and makes them stronger. It makes you more sensitive to what’s going on inside, both in the body and in the mind. It’s seeing how they’re interrelated, how you can use the breath to soothe the mind, how you can use the breath to soothe the body, and how they open up to each other when things are soothed like this. In this way, you can take care of your business inside. There’s a question of why is it that everything you do is for the sake of happiness, well-being, and yet you’re causing suffering? It’s totally through ignorance and lack of skill. Ignorance of how you’re doing things. But lack of skill is something that can be overcome. Ignorance is something that can be overcome. And these are the tools to do it. Be mindful, alert, ardent. Try to be sensitive to what’s going on with the breath, because the breath has a bodily fabrication that connects to what the Buddha calls verbal and mental fabrication. The verbal fabrication is basically the way you talk to yourself. He defines it in two terms, direct a thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you comment on the topic. Ask questions. Pass judgment. That kind of fabrication gets exercised in this process as well. You’re directing your thoughts to the breath and you’re judging how well you’re doing. And the judgment here is not like a final judgment. It’s like the judgment of a work-in-progress, like a carpenter judging his work as he planes things and nails things and cuts things. And then he sees, “Whoops, I made a mistake.” Well, it’s not the end. He figures out how to compensate for the mistake and move on. That’s the kind of judgment we’re talking about here. And in addition to bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication, there’s mental fabrication, where your perceptions and feelings, you’re trying to create a feeling of well-being. And you use your perception of the breath to stick with it. And the way you perceive the breath is going to have an influence on how you experience the process of breathing in the body. You can think of the breath, as I said, as a whole body process. You can think of the breath energy originating in the body. You can think of the breath as an element that’s in the body but also surrounding the body. There are lots of perceptions you can use that can make the breath more comfortable, more pleasant. And this way you get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing to shape your experience. And you begin to catch yourself when you’re doing something with lack of skill. This is how we go about beginning to solve that problem of why we cause our self-suffering. And this is how we learn to be more self-reliant in solving this problem for ourselves. Again, this is so that no one else can solve it for us. We can help one another. We can give advice. But the actual doing is something each of us has to do for him or her. So here are the tools. And here’s some time.

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