Restlessness

October 21, 2017

When you focus on the breath, think of the breath as a whole body process. All the nerves of the body, all the cells of the body, are participating in the breathing. Let your awareness spread out to fill the body. This is something of a balancing act. It’s one of the reasons why we come to a quiet place like this, with fewer distractions than normal, fewer responsibilities. So you can focus on getting three things together—your awareness, the whole body, and a feeling of pleasure, a feeling of well-being. Think of the breath as a whole body process. What kind of breathing would feel good? Nourishing the whole body. Soothing it when it needs to be soothed. Energizing it when it needs to be energized. And learning to really appreciate that sense of well-being that you can develop just simply through the way you breathe. It’ll allow your awareness to melt down into the body. Teacher Hakuin had an image. For him, it was curing what he called “Zen sickness.” When you’re meditating, a lot of the energy goes up into the head and seems to get stuck there. But it’s a good image to use. Think of your awareness getting out of the world, outside, and back down into the body. Think of it being like a big ball of butter on top of your head. It’s going to melt down into the body and saturate everything. And if you’re not very alert and suddenly find yourself off thinking about something else, you’ll have dropped the whole body awareness and gone someplace else. Just drop that thought and come back. Because you want to make this your default mode, full body awareness. So you can do this while you’re sitting in meditation. You want to then get up and walk around for a bit. See if you can maintain that same kind of awareness while you’re walking around. Because you want to be able to carry this awareness into the rest of your life. There are various techniques or strategies that you use to get the awareness to be willing to settle into the body. One way is to just go through the different parts of the body and see where there’s any tension. Allow it to relax. If you find yourself bending over, think of it more as anything that’s pulling you out of good alignment. Allow that muscle to relax. You’re going to go down the spine. Think about straightening the back. Go down to the legs, down to the tips of the toes, down the shoulders, down the arms, down the tips of the fingers. Think of any tension in the head, allowing that to relax. As you fully occupy the body in this way, you find that the parts of the body that you were using to think have less and less of a foothold. This is an important skill to develop if you’re trying to get rid of distracting thoughts or restless thoughts. Because in order to think, in order to maintain a thought, there’s going to have to be tension someplace in the body as your marker, as your reminder. As you think a particular thought, this is why mental work really tires the body. You’ve got markers all over the place, especially if you’re having to think about something complex. Reclaim the body, inhabit it, and breathe through all the markers from past thoughts, the bits of tension that were left behind. And try to be sensitive of any new tension building up. This is one of the main techniques that the Buddha recommends for dealing with restless thoughts, is noticing where there’s a tension that goes with a thought and relaxing it. It’s a lot easier to see if you’ve cleaned everything out. It’s like wanting to know where today’s dust settled in the house. Now, if you’ve left the house dusty all the time, you won’t be able to see which dust is today’s dust and which dust is yesterday’s, or last week’s, or last month’s. If you notice, “Ah, here’s the dust from today.” Or like the pad out here in front of the cellar. Ordinarily we sweep in the evening. Tonight I didn’t have time. But that way we know if any animals have come through. “Oh no, this was an animal from last night.” They leave tracks behind. So you’re trying to clean out the body as much as you can so that when a new thought comes in, there’s a pad of tension that goes with it. You can breathe through it. This is a useful technique, especially when the restlessness in the mind comes from a lack of energy. There are basically two types of restlessness—too much energy or too little energy. With too little energy, you don’t have the strength to resist thoughts as they just start swarming around from all over the place inside the mind. So instead of trying to force them out, try to relax around them. Notice that when they come up, there will be some tension. Relax that. Relax that. Relax that. The more fully you occupy the present moment like this, the less room they’ll have to move in and switch you over to another time frame or another space inside another thought world. You’re right here, fully right here. It’s almost as if the route to the past or the future is a little tiny tube. If you make your mind really small, you can go down the tube very easily. But if you make it large, it doesn’t fit. Think of being aware of the hand in the hand, aware of the foot in the foot, your torso in the torso. All too often our idea is that we’re up here on our heads. Then the head is aware of the other parts of the body. But actually, as you get into the body, you begin to realize that the air of the chest has an awareness of the chest, the air of the hand has an awareness of the hand. That’s the kind of awareness you want to get in touch with. Relax into that, and you’ll begin to see that any other thought that comes up is just a lot of useless or unnecessary effort. So this is how you deal with times when the mind feels tired and thoughts move in because it’s tired. You’re basically strengthening the mind by getting it back in touch with the body. This is why we’re talking today about how when people get really good at concentration, they go into formless states. They can’t stay there. The energy comes from being with the body. And you can stay there for long periods of time, but it gets kind of blurry and weakened. So you have to get back to the body to strengthen the mind, relax all the different patterns of tension in there, and then be on the lookout. If any slight pattern of tension builds up, try to breathe right through it. It’s like a spider on a web. The spider is in one spot on the web, but the web is all connected so that the spider can sense if anything has gotten caught in the web and knows right where to go. Say there’s a fly or something that’ll spin the web around it, and then go back to its original spot and wait for the next thing. So have your center the spot where you tend to settle down, but try to spread your range of awareness so it fills the whole body so you can sense it for any other tension that builds up. Instead of spinning a web around it, you’re actually trying to de-spin it. In other words, scatter all the gathering of energy, the little energy knot that tends to form into the basis for a thought. Scatter that, and then go back to your center. This way you can deal with restlessness that comes from a lack of energy. Now there’s the other kind of restlessness when there’s too much energy in the mind. In cases like that, you say, “Well, give the mind something else to think about. It’s got the energy to think.” There are all kinds of things. Maybe the breath might be a little bit too subtle, a little bit too uninteresting. Think about the parts of the body. What have you got in this body? All different kinds of body parts. Start with the bones. See if you can visualize starting from the toes running on up, each bone in the foot, each bone in the leg, the hips, the spine, the shoulders, the arms, the skull. Remind yourself, “Yes, you’ve got this in your body as well.” Then all the various organs. You just chase them down, thinking what’s in the different parts of the body. In other words, give the mind some work to do. If it’s got that much energy, give it some work to do. Now part of it will say, “Well, I’ve actually got to worry about this other thing. This issue that might come up in the future.” And if it’s really something you have to think about, say, at the end of the hour, you’ll think about it after the mind has had a chance to rest and get cleared inside. And if it insists and says, “No, right now,” you remind yourself that you don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future. You can imagine all kinds of dangers. But what you do know is that a lot of unexpected things will happen, and you’re going to need a lot of mindfulness and alertness and discernment in order to deal with them. And where are you going to get those things? Through the practice. So you’re not being irresponsible by not thinking about those issues. You’ve got this technique for getting the mind sharper. This technique works well with a lot of issues that you have in daily life, in terms of your family. A problem comes up and it’s good to sit down and say, “Okay, I want to think about this problem at the end of the hour.” Pose the question in your mind and then put it aside. And if it comes up again at any time prior to the time you’d given for it, you say, “Not yet, not yet, not yet.” You’ve got to be firm with it. Say, “I need to develop my mindfulness. I need to develop my alertness. I need to develop my discernment.” It’s done by developing a concentration. It’s not the case that mindfulness and concentration are two separate practices. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. As I would have said, the themes of right concentration are the processes of establishing mindfulness, like when you’re with the breath. You’re aware of the breath in and of itself. You’re ardent. In other words, you’re trying to do this well. You’re alert. You’re watching what’s going on, what you’re doing in particular. Being in the present moment is not just whatever comes up. You want to see specifically, “What am I doing? What are the results of what I’m doing?” That’s alertness. Then mindfulness itself is remembering what you’ve learned from the past about how to deal with issues, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, any distractions that come up, you put them aside as best you can so you can settle down with the breath. That’s unique for getting the mind into concentration. So as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, you’re going to be learning some things about the workings of the mind, which is what this is all about. Understanding, “What is my mind doing? I want happiness, but here is my mind creating trouble.” I’m going to have all that trouble to learn how to think, to learn how to use language. And those powers are taking over. What you’ve got to do is learn how to put them under your control. That’s what the Buddha said, when you learn how to control your thinking so that you think what you want to think and you don’t think what you don’t want to think. And at the same time, your taste in what you would want to think gets more refined. A lot of things that you used to like to think about, you begin to realize it’s a lot of garbage. And even though you could think about those things, you realize you don’t want to think about them anymore. This is where the discernment comes in. The more you’re able to use your discernment in cutting through distracting thoughts, the easier it’s going to be. There will come times when you simply have to use the power of your concentration as the technique of last recourse. The Buddha says you stick your tongue against the roof of your mouth and you beat down your mind with your mind. In other words, you put pressure on it and say, “I will not think that thought.” One good way of doing this is to think of a meditation word and just repeat it over and over again in the mind really fast, rapid fire. And think of the whole body saying that meditation word. That requires a certain amount of force. It’s a temporary state. It’s a stopgap measure. When the air is clear, then you can relax a bit and then go back to that technique of just breathing through wherever a thought seems to be forming. So what you’ve got to deal with when you’re dealing with restlessness is, one, checking the level of energy in the mind, and then, two, looking at what the mind has to say about why it wants you to think about these things, what excuses, what reasoning it gives, or why you shouldn’t be with a breath or shouldn’t be calm when you’ve got to get worked up about something. So you deal with the energy level. You also deal with those arguments. And there are times when if the mind is really stubborn, well, you can be stubborn too. You don’t just give in. You’ve got to share your thoughts. Who’s boss? And so in this way you get to know your mind better and you get to use it better as well. So particularly in that insight when you realize that all the thinking and planning and worrying sometimes actually makes the problem worse, whatever it is you’re worried about. Or it’s putting it aside for the time being. Giving the mind a little space, giving the issue a little space. You can come back to it and you can see it a lot more clearly. And working with the breath gives you precisely the tools you need, the energy you need, so that you can take charge of your thoughts and they don’t take charge of you.

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