Skills to Take Home

November 4, 2017

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and ask yourself, “Where do you feel the breathing?” Not just the air coming in and out through the nose, but the feeling of movement in the body, the energy coursing through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where is it most prominent? Focus your attention there and see if you can keep it there. Then ask yourself, “Is the breath comfortable?” And if you’re not sure, you can try different ways of adjusting the breath. Shorter? Weaker? Stronger? Heavier? Lighter? Faster? Slower? Deeper? More shallow? Think of the breath as a whole body process. You’re focused on one spot, but you can’t help but feel the energy of having a body here in all the different parts. Think of them as being connected. You’re not just in one spot in the body. Your main focus is in one spot, but you’re picking up sensations in the arms, in the hands, in the feet. And just tell yourself whatever sensations you feel about the body inside, for the time being, think of it as breath. Does it feel like good breath? If not, why breathe in that way? See if you can breathe in another way. I’m asking you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. The breath is one of the few things I haven’t privatized yet. You can breathe any way you want. So what way do you want to breathe right now? Ask yourself that. What feels good? If you’re feeling tired, you may want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re feeling tense, breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. Bring things into balance. This is a good place to stay. That makes it a lot easier to stay here. If the breath feels constricted, the mind’s going to want to wander off. And that’s not going to benefit from meditation. Because the meditation is all about being right here, right now, so you can see what’s going on right here, right now. What is the mind doing? And you’ll find that as you try to stay here, there are other members of the mind’s committee that want to do other things. You’ve got to learn how to say “no” to them and be on top of it. Otherwise they’ll kidnap you. It’s like you’re here and all of a sudden you’re off someplace else. It’s as if someone came up behind you and put a big sack over you, carried you off, and then deposited you someplace else. The mind can cover up its own activities from itself in just that way. It’s almost as if you pass out for a brief moment and then you’re someplace else. Actually, many things are going on in the mind during that moment, but the mind has a tendency to shut them away or put a curtain over them to catch you when you’re unawares. So be alive to the fact that there are parts of the mind that will want not to stay with the breath. So you’ve got to do everything you can to counteract that and be alert to what’s going on. But just this much gives you an idea of how much the mind can be out of control. And it’s not just while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It goes on throughout the day. And it’s this constant chatter, the constant back and forth in the mind. All the different members of the Minds Committee, these are the things that weigh the mind down. Because they’re acting on so many cross-purposes, attempting things and then not finishing because you get distracted by something else, and then something else, and then something else, and then you try to come back and you’re there for a while, and then something else again. And a lot of that “something else” can be a real burden for the mind. The Buddha has an image. He says we’re struck by a pain if we’re being shot by one arrow. But then the mind’s reaction is like another arrow. So we double our pain, although even that’s a little bit too little. One arrow comes in and we shoot a whole quiver. But actually, it’s not just about major pains, the little things. The Buddha gives an image of our senses. He says it’s like a flayed cow standing next to a bush and all the flying insects in the bush come over and they land on the cow. Just little tiny bits and bites all over. And for every little bit and bite, there seems to be an arrow. And we add extra arrows on top of that. So it’s a real flurry of arrows. This is how we go through the day. And the basic message of the Buddha’s teachings is that sometimes he says life is suffering. That’s not what he said. He said we’re causing our self-suffering. That’s what he’s saying. It’s all this out-of-control activity in the mind. That’s what’s causing the suffering. There may be little arrows coming in from outside, but they’re nothing compared with the arrows with which we shoot ourselves. That’s what we’ve got to watch out for. So we meditate to learn how to put down that bow and arrow with which we shoot ourselves and just notice what’s there. And then see if we can take this skill and bring it into our lives. It’s easier here in a quiet place. Not too many responsibilities. Not too much social contact. So you can see your mind. And you notice how much the mind is adding burdens on top of itself, even when you’re sitting here just with your eyes closed, doing nothing. Even more so when you’re reacting to events around you, and events get hectic as you leave the monastery and get out into what they call the real world. You may not be able to carry the peace of the monastery with you, but it’s good to carry the skill of giving the mind a place to settle down and be at home with the breath energy in the body. And although as you’re working on other projects it may be too much to ask to be aware of the in- and out-breath chill, you can be aware of the quality of the breath energy in the body. As soon as you notice anything tense or tight coming up, you try to relax it. It’s one of the basic skills of the meditation that’s not limited just to being on the meditation cushion or in the meditation posture. You can do that as you go through the day. Tension here, tension there. Breathe through it. Relax it. Don’t let it build up. If you can manage it, take a little meditation break every now and then, just a few minutes, enough to clear things out inside, to give your full attention to the breath. But let the breath always be in the background. Let it be the foundation on which you stand. For a lot of people, daily life is like juggling a lot of balls in the air. When we say, “Keep your mind with the breath,” it sounds like there’s one more ball to juggle. But actually, that’s not the case. It’s more like the breath is where you stand, and it gives you a solid place to stand as you’re juggling the balls. But also, when things come up in the mind, it gives you a place to step back, to pull yourself out of whatever the burdens in thought may be. Then you realize how much you weigh yourself down by your own actions. This is not to say that there aren’t horrible people out there. There are. But they can’t shoot your mind the way you do. You’re the one who shoots deep into the mind. All they can do is shoot your body. But it’s the arrows that go into the mind. Those are the ones that really hurt, and you’re the one who’s shooting them. This is true for all of us. So at the very least, you want a place you can stay and take as your home basis here, your place to stand, your safe place to be. And then try to use your mind as your insight to see if you’re picking up something and stabbing yourself with it, asking yourself why. And whatever insights you can gain in that way. They’re going to be different for different people. And even for one person, they’ll be different in different situations. At home, you stab yourself one way. At work, you stab yourself another way. But when you can see that you don’t have to do it, when you begin to see that the part of the mind says, “Yes, you’ve got to stab yourself with this thought,” just realizing that you are stabbing yourself, that gives you an image to work with. Then you can ask yourself, “Why am I stabbing myself with this? Why am I stabbing myself with that? Why on earth would I want to think in those ways?” And part of the mind will say, “Well, you have to, or it’s the only way to do it.” Learn to question that. So when someone says something, you can stab only as far as the ear and it doesn’t come into the mind. When somebody does something, you can step back from it and not take it as a personal front and ask yourself, “Is this a duty I have to attend to now? Or is this something that can wait? Or is it not my duty at all?” There are a lot of things going on in the world that we learn about, but they’re not our duties. They’re just excess burdens for the mind. A lot of the news cycle is like that. There’s very little news out there that’s actually relevant to your life. And yet we have this fear of missing out. And it can drive us crazy. The basic message that Buddha gave us is that we’re causing our self-suffering right here, right now. And this is the most important thing you have to worry about in the world. We tend to forget that. That’s the Buddha’s priority. We push it back and say, “Well, I have to worry about this job, and I have to worry about this relationship, or this whatever.” But above all, your priority should be, “I can attend to this job, but I don’t have to make myself suffer over it.” That’s something you have to figure out. The Buddha gives you ways of analyzing that. You see, “Oh, this is a perception that I’ve been holding on to, just an image in the mind, or a word in the mind. There’s some whispering going on in the mind.” That’s what the Buddha calls “directed thought and evaluation.” You pick up a topic and then you run with it. What are the perceptions that drive you crazy? There’s one set that he calls “the perceptions of objectification,” where you turn your self into, “I am this thinker, and I have to do this, and I need this in the world in order to survive.” And that kind of thinking always leads to conflict. You learn to put that “I am the thinker” down and just be with, “Okay, there’s this activity in the mind, and there’s that activity in the mind.” And these sense impressions come again. You can break it down into little pieces like that. It’s a lot easier to pull yourself out of the worlds that the mind creates out of those pieces. And part of the problem is that some of these worlds we create for ourselves start out looking like fun, but then they lead to all kinds of trouble. This is another reason why you want a good place to stay, so you don’t have to go into those worlds. You won’t be tempted to. You can step back. You can gain some distance, not only from the rest of the world, but also from your own thoughts. That way you begin to cut things down to size, so you can live in the world but not suffer from the world, or not use the world to make yourself suffer. That’s what it actually is. It’s learning to see that. That’s one of the main, most important insights you can gain. It’s not the horrible things that are happening out there, or the dreary things, or the boring things, or whatever it is that’s weighing the mind down. It’s what we do with those things, how we stab ourselves with them. That’s what makes us suffer. That’s what loads the burdens on the mind. So if you can take them apart, put them down. They’ll miss. If someone says something horrible, you just watch it go right past. You don’t have to suck it into the mind. Because there’s another area where you go wrong. We tend to feed off of whatever’s out there. It’s when other people spit out nasty things. Think of a John Lee’s image. It’s like they spit something down on the floor and you bend down and pick it up to chew on it. Then when it makes you sick, who are you going to blame? You’re the one who picked it up. Don’t let your mind be like a vacuum cleaner, sucking things up. Watch things go past. And when you don’t let them strike you, then you’re in a much better position to respond appropriately. So these are some of the skills you want to carry with you as you leave the monastery. So you can stop shooting yourself with those second arrows. Because the less you do that, it’s not only for your own good. You go around getting shot like that all the time. You weaken yourself and you have to depend more and more on other people. But if you’re not shooting yourself, you’re much less of a burden on others. So the skill is good all around. And it’s simply a question of to what extent we can remember to carry it with us as we go. And develop our own ingenuity in finding ways to apply it to our own particular arrows and our own particular situation. But that’s what makes the practice interesting. It’s not just a matter of putting your mind to the meat grinder. You have to learn how to use your ingenuity as well. And that’s where the skill gets fun. There’s an enjoyment in seeing a situation where you used to make yourself suffer, but now you don’t. And the pieces of the burdens that you’ve been placing on the mind fall away.

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