Exercising the Mind (outdoors)

October 7, 2018

Focus on your breath. Breathe in deep. Let the breath go out on its own. Keep watch over the mind to stay with the breath. The breath is happening all the time. What’s going to make a difference? The difference is the consistency with which you watch it. Try to stay steadily right here. I remember the first time I read a book talking about how people’s concentration is really much worse than it should be. And the author gave an instruction. He said, “Go look at a window frame, and then look at the bottom edge of the window, and then just trace your eyes across it and see if you can move them steadily and consistently across that line.” And if you haven’t been trained, you’ll notice that you jump. There’s a moment of attention, and then there’s a jump, and then there’s another moment, and then another jump. And it’s a problem that in those jumps we’re not really carefully observant of what’s happening. You watch the breath for a bit, and then there’s the jump, and then you watch it some more, and there’s a missing gap. So if you see the mind jump away from the breath, say, “No, I’m going to stick right here.” Bore right into the breath. See if you can connect one moment of attention with the next moment without there having to be a gap. And that’s how the mind gets a real sense of well-being, being with the breath. The breath begins to smooth out because you’re not jumping around. And the mind has a real sense of belonging right here. It doesn’t jump at the lightest impulse. Our problem is that we go through life like this, jumping from one thing to the next. And in that moment of jumping, there’s a gap where we forget, and then we start all over again. And as I was saying this morning, we tend to forget a lot of the good things we learned. When we jump like that, there’s a moment of unconsciousness. Things get forgotten. Then you pick them up again. In order to make the most of what you’ve learned, you have to be consistent, seeing it all the way through. You learn something and make sure you don’t forget it, even as you go from one topic to the next. Try to do it mindfully. Instead of just randomly. And if you develop this quality in the meditation, it’s going to help you in your life outside as well. Because when you’re not jumping around like this, you see things that other people don’t see. You see things that you didn’t see before. This is one of the ways in which concentration helps to develop your discernment. We create states of mind that are called becoming. It’s like a little world in your mind. And as you go into that world, that suddenly becomes your surrounding, that becomes your environment. Then you lose interest in it, or something else comes along, and you create another one. These are all based on desires. Each desire has a little world, and there’s a little bit of you in each of those desires. This can happen randomly. It can happen when strong emotions come. It’s the same thing the mind does when it falls asleep and dreams. A little world will appear in your mind, and you go into that world. Suddenly you’re a different person, perhaps, in that world. And you’re off in a different location. The rules of behavior become different. This is what we have to watch out for in our waking times. Because, as the Buddha said, the principles of karma are 24/7. He didn’t use that word 24/7, but he said they’re consistent. They’re in operation all the time. So you want to make sure that what you do is skillful all the time. That means you have to remember what’s skillful, how to recognize it, and also how to recognize what’s unskillful. Remember what to do when something unskillful comes in the mind so that you don’t fall victim to it. You don’t go running along with it. What to do when something skillful appears so that you don’t ignore it and pass it over. You want to develop it. These are lessons you learn sometimes from listening to the Dhamma, sometimes from your own observation of what you’ve done. And you want to be able to keep those lessons in mind. So that when a strong emotion comes, you’re not suddenly pulled by the emotion into forgetting what you know is really good for you in the long term. So we try to create this sense of continuous knowing as a way of helping our mindfulness. And at the same time, it provides a greater sense of well-being right here, as the Buddha said, “There is no happiness other than peace.” And even though we may be able to think of some things, forms of happiness, that are not especially peaceful, when you actually look at them, you realize the reason you find them good is because you can stay with them for a long time. At least for a certain stretch of time. Whereas with the breath, if you’re really mindful, you can stay with it for as long as you want. It’s always coming in, always going out. As long as you’re alive, it’s going to be coming in and going out. The only reason that we’re not consistently aware of the breath is that we’re not consistently here. We’re running off someplace else. So there is the possibility of just staying right here. When the mind can stay like this, it doesn’t have to think about anything else. It has no other responsibilities, no other cares. It allows it to relax in the present moment. And the reason it can relax is because it’s finally gotten the message that it doesn’t have to jump. Normally the mind is like a cat going along shelves along the wall, going from one shelf to the next, jumping here, jumping there. Each time it jumps, it continues to be tense as it lands because it knows it’s going to have to jump. What we’re trying to do is get the mind to say with the breath, “Bring the cat down to the floor where it has no fear of falling away.” And then it can relax totally. You’ve seen cats relax in the sun. They stretch out. It’s almost like they have no bones at all. The one difference here is that we have to make sure that we maintain our alertness even as we relax. This is where you learn the lesson about how you have to stay with the breath. Even though there’s a lot of comfort around the breath, you can’t just drop the breath and go for the comfort. You’ve got to stay with the breath coming in, going out, or at least stay with the perception of breath flowing through different parts of the body. Ideally what you want is the breath filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body, and your awareness filling the body, all three together. If the awareness is too small, then it’s going to be very easy for it to slip off someplace else. But if you’re aware of your hands, feet, head, hands, feet, head, keep it going, all the parts of the body, and having a sense that the energies in the body all flow together. Then you get the ideal state for concentration, which is resting but alert. Alert but at rest. So you’re developing strength at the same time that you’re resting. This is where the mind is not like the body. For the body to gain strength, you have to exercise it. You have to move it around. For the mind to gain strength, you have to keep it still. But of course that doesn’t mean nothing’s happening. Your mindfulness is working. Your alertness is working. You’re concerned to do this well. All three of these things are working as everything else falls still. It’s in this way that the meditation can be both energizing and resting at the same time. So that you come out of it fully prepared. You’re more alert, more stable. The ideal state of mind to bring into this world of ours, where we have to be always careful all the time about what we’re going to do. There’s so many things out there that can provoke you to do unskillful things. You’ve got to keep remembering, “No, I’ve got to remember that my true value as a person, my true wealth as a person, lies in the things that I do. The things that happen to me, that other people do to me, those aren’t important. It’s what I do that’s important.” Always keep that thought in mind. And then you strengthen it through training the mind in mindfulness concentration. Learning how to exercise the mind but keeping it still but alert. That gives you the foundation to keep going. Because in addition to mindfulness, you need strength. It’s possible to learn a lesson. If you forget it, that’s a lack of mindfulness. But sometimes you can remember the lesson but you just don’t feel like doing it. You don’t feel up to doing it. That’s because you lack strength. This is how the meditation really helps you in daily life. It gives you both the mindfulness, exercises both the mindfulness and increases your strength. So that when you learn a good lesson, you can remember it and carry it out. Time after time. Because you keep giving the mind its own place to be, its own place to rest and gain strength again and again. you

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