Stable & Just Right

August 10, 2019

When you focus on the breath, try to make the focus just right and make the breath just right. With the breath, it’s a matter of noticing what feels good. Not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light, not too deep or too shallow. For that, you can experiment a bit. And then you’ve decided that something feels just right. As for the focus, it’s a question of putting too much or too little pressure on the spot where you’re focused. Too little pressure and the mind will wander away very quickly. Too much and you start distorting the flow of the breath energy and the flow of the blood in the body. That’s not what you want. You want the mind and the body to be together on good terms, staying together but not pushing each other too much. You’re trying to create a state of normalcy here, a state of stability. That’s going to require a sense of ease, and a sense of ease that can spread through the body. Because even though it’s natural that there will be one spot in the body where you’re focused more than other spots, you want to be able to fill the whole body with your awareness without putting any pressure on the breath, without putting any pressure on the blood, but just be present together and develop that sense of just right. Because that’s where you can find stability. Sometimes, as the mind settles down, things do get distorted. If the body feels very small, or if the body feels very large, or you feel like you’re outside the body, those are said to be some of the signs of rapture. In other words, in pali, piti, which can also be translated as refreshment. But it can get distorted. Some meditation methods tend to highlight the distortions and interpret them as some special attainment. They’re not. They’re just a sign that the mind is beginning to settle down. That’s it. But if you focus on those manifestations, you lose the breath, you lose your proper focus. It’s like driving down a highway. You come into valley center, there’s a sign that says, “Now entering the valley center.” Or a sign that says, “Escondido is so many miles away.” Just take it as a sign and continue driving on the road. You don’t go and drive on the sign. In other words, you stay with the breath. Don’t focus on the manifestations of the strange things that can happen as the sense of the body gets distorted as you’re settling down. Focus is not quite right. It’s a phase you may have to go through. But when the mind really settles down, everything is normal. Everything is very easeful, very still, very centered, very stable. Because it’s only when the mind is really stable like that that you can see things clearly. There’s not a lot of lights and flashy colors. It’s just the sense of the mind feels grounded. It’s not easily knocked over. If you’re going to get any insights into the mind, if you’re going to deal with obstreperous voices in the mind, this is what you’ve got to establish as the meeting place. Because there are parts of the mind that are not really happy to be meditating. They’d rather be doing something else. Or they have whatever their agendas may be. Some of them are fearful. Some of them know that their reasons are not good. They don’t like to be exposed. And so they hide. They shut themselves out. They don’t cooperate. And to get them to cooperate so you can actually talk to them, you have to create a place of safety and stability. It’s like talking to a child. If you really want to get to know the child well and have the child open up, you create a stable home environment. So you’re creating a stable sense of the mind belonging together with the body, the body belonging to the mind. And they feel that they’re just right for each other. If you put too much pressure on any one spot, that distorts the relationship. The ideal focus is one that, as soon as it focuses on something, instead of tensing it up, it sends relaxation. The relaxation spreads out from that spot. And the focus of your awareness and the background feel of your awareness can settle in together. Your thoughts, your reasonings, and your emotions can settle in together. That doesn’t mean that things will automatically open up and things will be cleared up very quickly. Sometimes it takes a lot of time for the different parts of the mind to trust one another. But at least you’re providing the ideal space so that when it does happen, it will happen. When the conditions are right. If you don’t provide the space, the conditions never will be right. So think body at normalcy, mind at normalcy. And John Lee talks a lot about having the elements or the properties of the body in balance. Not too warm, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light. Not too much solidity, not too much dizziness with the breath. If you’ve got too much breath energy, you get dizzy. Too much of the earth property. Things get very tight and difficult. It gets hard to breathe. So think balance, think normalcy, stability. That’s what we’re after. And if anything is out of balance, ask yourself, “In which direction does it seem to be out of balance, and how can you compensate?” Sometimes the lack of balance comes from too much energy flowing up into the head. You’ve got tight bands of tension around the head as a result. In that case, think of the energy flowing down as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Down, down, down, both in and out. Out the soles of the feet, out the palms of the hands. But if the energy is going down too much, then you start getting sluggish. So again, it’s a matter of finding the right balance and realizing that you do have these tools for bringing things into balance. That’s one of the purposes of mindfulness. Not only to keep people with the object of meditation, but also to have ready at hand any of the techniques you’ve learned from the past that work, or any lessons you’ve learned about what you can do with the breath energy in the body. What you can do as you settle in and then spread your awareness of the body. So you’ve got three things in a situation. Your state of normalcy together, your awareness filling the body, the breath filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body. And they feel just right together. And then the impatient part of the mind will say, “Well, what’s next?” And the wiser part of the mind will say, “This is what’s next.” Learn how to maintain it. Learn to make this your default mode, the place where the mind dwells. It’s like moving into a house. You’re going to ask, “Well, what house are we going to move into tomorrow?” You ask, “How can I make this house more livable so I can stay right here and I don’t have to move around a lot?” That’s the right attitude to have to concentration, and the right concentration to try to develop. One where you feel solid, stable, safe, at home. You feel like you belong right here. And for the time being, there’s no reason to go anywhere else.

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