Body, Feelings, Mind (outdoors)

July 24, 2022

When you start meditating, you have to take a survey. Survey your mind, survey your body, to see if they’re ready to come together. Because you’re going to try to bring three things together. The breath, the mind. And you bring them together with a sense of ease. It’s almost like making a sandwich. You have the two halves of bread, and they stay together because you have a filling. In this case, the filling is the sense of ease. But first you have to make sure that the other two halves are ready to settle in, so that they can create that sense of ease. Because they have to create it together. So first you look at your mind. Use your mind, as they say, in the old generations of the forestation. They say, “Is your mind leaning forward, leaning back? Is it leaning to the left, leaning to the right?” Leaning forward means you’re worried about something in the future. Leaning back, you’re worried about something in the past. Leaning to the left, you’re thinking about things you like. Leaning to the right, you’re thinking about things that make you angry, that you don’t like. If that’s the case, you’ve got to do something to clear them up, clear out these thoughts. And sometimes you can just use the breath, because you have to give the mind something it likes to be with in the present moment. Otherwise, it’s not going to let go of the past or the future, or other things it likes or dislikes. So here you turn around and look at the breath. What’s the breath like in the body right now? Is it too long, too short? How do you know? Well, you try changing it to see what happens. Make it longer, make it shorter. How does that feel? Make it heavier or lighter. How does that feel? Deeper or more shallow? Faster or slower? And if you find a way of breathing that feels really good and the mind is willing to settle down, you’re fine. Sometimes the breath feels really good, but the mind is still not willing to settle down. That’s when you’ve got to think about other things. The Buddha recommends sometimes thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. How lucky we are that we have someone who found this path to the end of suffering, and someone who is a person of real integrity and who had very high standards. He was taught by the best meditation teachers of the time, and he realized that that still wasn’t good enough. So he went out and he was willing to torture himself for six years, going without food, forcing himself not to breathe at all, to the point where he was passing out. He realized that there was nothing to be found that way. Then he was willing to give up the pride that comes with that kind of practice, the pride of being able to submit to tortures that other people can’t stand. He had thought of a time when he was a child, his mind had naturally entered concentration, and something inside him said, “This is the path.” So he gave it a try. Again, he didn’t just believe everything that occurred to his mind. He said, “Well, I’ve got to give this a try.” And he found that he kept his mind really, really still, and so still that it could be used to gain knowledge. And the important thing he gained knowledge about was how to put an end to suffering. That was his awakening. After he awakened, he could have just sat there and spent the rest of his life enjoying the bliss of release. But he thought of all the people in the world who could benefit from his teachings. So he went out and he taught for free. He walked all over northern India for forty-five years. Even though he was eighty years old, he was still walking around, teaching here, teaching there. So you think about his wisdom, his compassion, and his purity. He never acted in a way that harmed anybody at all. And he also taught other people how to be harmless. We’re fortunate that we have a teacher like this. We have the dharma that he taught for free. It’s still available. That’s one line of thinking. Get the mind willing to settle down. Because you start wondering about yourself. Here it is. Here’s this opportunity to practice, and I’m not taking advantage of it. Why do I let the thoughts of the day get in the way? Even more so when you think about the topic of death. Death could come at any time. What happens after death depends on the state of your mind. Is your mind in good shape to go, or are there other things that make it really difficult to go well? If there are, then that’s the work you’ve got to do. And you don’t know when that’s going to come, so you should do it now if you can. Here you are. You’ve got the opportunity. Or you can simply think about goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. If you really had your true welfare in mind, you’d want to train your mind. Because otherwise the mind is so good at creating unnecessary suffering out of its own ignorance. Because it doesn’t really know itself well. So take this opportunity to settle down in the present moment. Watch the mind as it stays with the breath. Begin to learn how to understand some of its intentions. Learn how to read its intentions so you know what’s skillful and what’s not. In other words, you’re trying to find ways of thinking and get the mind willing to settle down and pay attention right here. Because it’s the choices that the mind makes in the present moment. Those are the things that shape your life. And you’re going to be able to see them clearly, not just do them on automatic pilot. So here’s the chance to be with the breath, with a sense of well-being, with awareness, fully centered in the present moment and filling the present moment. So there you are. Body, feeling, mind. And they fully inhabit the body. The breath fully inhabits the body, your feeling of ease inhabits the body, and the mind does too. When you’re meditating properly, all these things seem like one. The breath, the ease, your awareness of these things. When the Buddha explains them, though, he explains them separately. But it’s good to remember that separate explanations are there simply to give you an idea of what you do with this aspect of your concentration, remembering that the whole point of each series is to bring them all together with a sense of true stillness and well-being. Somebody talks about the steps of the breath. There are four. For the first two, you learn to notice what the breath feels like when it’s long and what it feels like when it’s short. And this can cover all other sets of variations as well. As I said, deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. The Buddha says, try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. What kind of breathing feels good when you think of the whole body? Think of the breathing as a whole body process. Then the final step of the breath is that you, as the Buddha says, you try to calm bodily fabrication. What that means is you let the breath grow calm. You don’t force it. It’s just when you’re aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, you allow the different patterns of tension in the different parts of the body to relax. You feel the breathing as a whole body process. The mind gets more and more still. You’re using less and less oxygen. You get to the point where you feel that the energy in the body feels felt. It feels full and you have no felt need to breathe in or breathe out. Now, the body will breathe if it needs to. You don’t have to worry that you’re suffocating yourself. Simply that everything is full. Everything is very quiet. Those are the steps of the breath. The steps with feeling, you start off trying to breathe in and out with that sense, a sense of fullness in the body, that the body is being refreshed by the breath. After a while the refreshment gets a little bit stronger. Then you think, well, let’s just breathe in a way that feels at ease. The third step and the four steps on the feeling are that you become sensitive to what the Buddha calls mental fabrication. What he means here is your feelings and your perceptions, the perceptions of the labels you have in mind for things. What kind of feeling helps the mind to settle down? What kind of perceptions help the mind to settle down? How do you visualize the breath or the flow of the breath in your body to yourself? What way is conducive to getting the mind to feel still? Then the final step is to calm mental fabrication. In other words, you’re trying to find feelings that are more and more calm. From refreshment you go to ease. From ease you go to equanimity. A lot of that is done by the perceptions you hold in mind. In the beginning you have the perception of the breath energy. The breath energy is coming from outside, as you breathe in and as you breathe out. But then you realize, well, how is it that you breathe in and breathe out? The energy itself actually originates inside the body. Where does it originate? Actually, there are several places where it could possibly originate. You find any one that seems clearest to you, you focus your attention there. Then as the energy spreads from that part of the body as you breathe in, you try to dissolve away any patterns of tension that may get in the way of it spreading. Then finally you get the perception that actually the breath is something that originates in every cell of the body. Every cell is breathing in, every cell is breathing out. You’re surrounded by these breathing cells. No one spot in the body gets prominence. They’re all illuminated, you might say, equally. That’s a very calm way of getting the breath to feel full within the body, with a sense of real ease. So those are the steps with feeling. Then there are the steps with the mind. We’ve already talked about them. You first get sensitive to the mind, what state it’s in. Then you’re trying to figure out how to gladden it, in other words, how to make it happy to be here. Once it’s happy to be here, the next step is how to give it a sense of really being here solidly, steadily, concentrated. That corresponds to the steps in the breath where you’re aware of the whole body and allowing the breath to grow calm. It corresponds to the steps in feelings where you’re sensitive to how your feelings and perceptions have an impact on the mind. You try to get that to grow calm. That way you can release yourself from all the things that would disturb your concentration. This is how the body and the feelings and the mind all work together to bring the mind to a state of balance where it can see all around whatever is happening in the mind. The whole body knows whatever is happening in the mind. It all becomes clear because your gaze is still and all around. Once you’re here, the next question is, “What’s next?” The answer is, “This is what’s next.” You’re trying to maintain what you’ve got. We all hear that once the mind is still, you’re trying to develop discernment. It’s as if you had to leave the stillness to develop the discernment. But that’s not the case. You have to develop discernment in maintaining the stillness because what’s going to happen is other thoughts that will come up might destroy this, so you have to watch out for them. Number one thought is, “This is boring.” The mind is really strange. It wants ease. It wants a sense of well-being. Once you give it a sense of well-being, you say, “Okay, enough of that. What’s next?” You have to learn how to get it to appreciate. It’s like medicine. Say you’ve got a rash on your skin. It’s not the case that you put the medicine on and then you just take it right off. You put the cream on and you let it stay there so it can do its work. In the same way, a good, solid state of mind like this can do its work in the mind, in the body, and you develop discernment in protecting it. So how do you protect it from the thought that it’s boring? You remind yourself, “Here you are developing a skill.” This is a different skill from the skills of the world. You have to worry about what’s next. What you worry about is, “What’s going to destroy something good that I’ve got already?” You learn to see through a lot of the mind’s subterfuges, because the mind does have this tendency to lie to itself. You want to see the lies for what they are, and this is the best place to see it. So don’t worry that discernment won’t develop. It will develop. Sometimes you have to consciously ask questions. As John Fruin said, “Meditators have two personalities. There’s the personality that thinks too much and the personality that doesn’t think enough.” We in the West tend to be the type that thinks too much, and the cure for that is to try to get the mind to be as still as possible and to be as protective as possible of stillness. Eventually, the mind’s basic habit of liking to ask questions will start asking questions. It’ll ask questions now coming from a still mind, which means it’ll be able to see the answers a lot more clearly. As for the other type of person, he said, “The other type of person doesn’t think enough. They find it easy to get the mind to stay still, but then they don’t really understand any steps in doing it. It just happens to plunk right down. There it is.” For people like this, the problem is that there are days when the mind doesn’t settle down and they really don’t know what to do. Or it does settle down. It just stays there. It doesn’t move. Nothing happens. No discernment develops. That’s when you have to start asking questions. When the mind leaves concentration, where does it go? What is it looking for? And what’s going out? Is greed going out? Is aversion going out? You want to learn how to observe your mind in action, because that’s what it comes down to either way. Observing the mind. As the Buddha pointed out, the reason we’re suffering is because of the craving that comes out of the mind. And the reason we fall for the craving is because we’re not aware of what’s going on. So as we meditate like this, with your awareness filling the body, your breath filling the body, your sense of ease filling the body, you’re in a great place to watch the mind, to understand what it’s doing, to see where it’s not skillful, to see what you can do to get rid of those unskillful states, and to protect the good states and let them grow. Ultimately, you get the mind to a point where it finds something really good that doesn’t need protecting. But in the meantime, look after this concentration really well. It’s like having a good road through your property. You want to maintain it as best you can. So that when you need to use it, there’s no problem. If you let the road get washed out, then if there’s a sudden emergency, ah, you’re running across this huge ditch that’s hard to cross. So keep this internal road in good repair.

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