Mastering Your Thoughts

January 5, 2024

As you sit here focusing on the breath, talk to yourself about the breath. Ask yourself whether it’s comfortable. And if it’s not comfortable, what could you do to change it? You could try making it longer, shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow, broad, narrow. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really good right now. And it’s good that you get to know the breathing as a whole body process. This is more than just talking to yourself about the breath and feeling the breath. You hold certain images in mind when you’re breathing. Think of the breath flowing through all the nerves of the body. The breath is not the air, it’s a movement of energy from the top of your head down to the toes, down the shoulders, down the arms, to the tips of the fingers. Try to create a sense of well-being. Learn to be very clear with yourself about how you’re doing this, because there will come some days when it’s not so easy. You get into a bad breathing pattern and it’s hard to get out unless you can notice some tricks. I noticed recently, the other day, that I was getting into a very tense breathing pattern. I focused on the breath in the back of the knees, and that seemed to work. That may not always work. At least it worked then. But what that requires is that you think outside the box. Try to use a little imagination in your meditation. We’re told that imagination is a bad thing. We’re trying to see things simply as they are. But things as they are are shaped by the perceptions we bring to the present moment. That includes our understanding of the different voices that come up in the mind. They’re not just voices. If there were just conversations going on in the mind, we could reason with the unreasonable ones, show where they were wrong. That would be the end of the matter. But they’ve learned how to seize your breath energy. They’ve learned how to use flashing images that go through the mind. The perceptions you hold by as you try to understand them, they present themselves, often being a lot bigger than they are, a lot more pervasive. So you need to counteract them, not only with reasoning with them, but with also taking the breath back. This is where I work on getting to know it and learning some really good skills for clearing unskillful breathing out of the body. When you scan the body, don’t totally lose your contact with how the basic breathing feels, coming in and going out. Make sure that that always feels good, because that’s what you’re using to spread good energy through the rest of the body. For example, if there’s some tightness in your knees, you can be aware of the breath rising and falling in the chest, and that it’s a good, smooth, easy rhythm. See how the knees connect with that. If they don’t seem to connect with that, then what’s the problem? As you search for the problem, make sure that the breathing at the chest stays comfortable. If you allow that to tense up, then what are you spreading to the knees? What are you spreading to the rest of the body? Have a sense of working through unskillful or tense breathing patterns in the body, and you have a good weapon to use against some of the stronger emotions that come in through the mind. Often you find that they don’t talk so much. They come at you with quick perceptions, like subliminal messages on the TV screen that flash and then are gone before you realize that they’ve laid a seed in your mind. So you want to hold some more skillful perceptions in mind. Sometimes some of the really strong emotions come on and say, “You’ve got to give in to us right now. If you don’t give in, we’ll squeeze your nerves and we’ll just hang around and get stronger and stronger until you finally are forced to give in.” If people came and said that to you, you’d wonder about them. Why are they trying to impress me with their strength? Maybe they don’t have much strength. Maybe they’re just empty threats. So learn how to question the way they present themselves, because they’re dealing with perceptions, these images that come back. They come through the mind that we tend to hold on to and that often seem to have more reality than reality itself. It’s because they play an important part in shaping your sense of reality. Think of the power of perception. Think of your picture of a woman who looks glum and dour, and the caption under it says, “Victim of a banking scam.” And you feel sorry for her. But suppose the caption said, “This was the perpetrator of a banking scam and she’s been caught.” She’s glum and dour, not because her money’s been taken away from her, but because she’s been caught taking money away from other people. Your feelings toward her are going to be very different. Same picture, but you’re coming at it with a different perception. The same applies to the mind. A lot of things going on in the mind keep on going on in the mind because they’ve given you certain perceptions that make you afraid of them. So when you change the perception, it doesn’t mean you pretend they’re not there. It’s just that you have a different perception of what their power is like. There’s a lot of emotions common in the ego, and the potential for them may still be there, but they’re not necessarily building up. Freud’s image of fluid dynamics, that your mind is like a system of pipes with steam being forced through the pipes. You’ve got to release it, otherwise the pipes will break. That’s a pretty bad image for the mind, but it’s an image that our defilements like to use. So these voices in the mind that come and talk to you, that sound like you talking to yourself, you have to realize that they’re employing not only words, words and sentences, but they’re also employing images, and they’ve seized the breath energy in different parts of the body. So if you’re going to counteract them, you have to deal with them on all those fronts. It requires using some imagination, using some ingenuity, to test what works and what doesn’t work. But that’s how knowledge develops. You know that book on the structure of scientific revolutions? As the author points out, it’s not that we have over the centuries just learned bits and pieces of new knowledge and just glued them on to the old knowledge. There are certain paradigms that hold sway, images of how the world works, and then some facts come up that don’t fit in with the image, and for a while those facts are ignored because they don’t fit. But then there become so many of them that it’s obvious that reality is not like the picture, so people cast around for a new picture. So it’s replacing one frame with another frame, and then another frame. And part of it has to do with what people are looking for, and part of it is simply what presents itself. It’s the same in your mind. If you frame the issue in a certain way, that causes you to suffer. If you frame it in a way that allows the defilements to take over easily, you kind of find a new frame. Tell yourself that all the awakened beings of the past have been through the same problems you’re going through right now. It’s not like you have invented some new problem that nobody had ever encountered before. All the great Arahants, all the Buddhists, they’ve been through what you’ve been through, and not because they were Arahants or Buddhists. This was well before they became Arahants or Buddhists. The point being that every problem that comes up in the mind has a solution. If you hold on to that principle, that working hypothesis, you find it a lot easier to think up new ways of relating to the breath, new ways of talking to yourself, new ways of creating perceptions in the mind that put your skillful selves more in power. Your desire for true happiness can begin to get the upper hand. That’s what the Buddha means when he says you learn how to master the pathways of thought. So you learn how to think the thoughts you want to think and don’t have to think the thoughts you don’t want to think. Then you get a better and better idea of what kind of thoughts really are worth thinking. So it’s not the case that your emotions or your thoughts take over. You’re the one in charge of them, and that’s the way it should be.

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