Throughout the Day

March 5, 2024

For many of us, concentration is like a fragile object you hold in your lap while you’re sitting here. As long as you’re sitting still, the object is safe. When you get up, it falls off your lap and breaks. Then the next time you come to sit, or the next time you do walking meditation, you have to pick up the pieces. It’s an important part of the practice that you learn how to hold the concentration as you get up, as you go through the next movements after coming out of the sitting posture, and as you begin to take on your responsibilities for the day, how you hold it. It is an extra duty. It’s a skill that every mature person has to develop. But the Buddha’s asking you to develop it to an nth degree. In other words, be aware all the time of what your mind is doing, where it’s going, whether it’s going in the places it should be going or not. Because it’s an extra duty, it requires more energy. This is why it’s important that you get a sense of well-being with the breath, taking the breath as your basis. In the past, I’ve used the image of going through the day juggling. Instead of thinking of the meditation as one more ball you have to juggle and keep in the air, think of it as the place where you stand. Learn how to stay there and return there when you go away, because it’s going to happen, for sure. Just like your early days of practice and concentration, you find yourself with three breaths and you’re gone. When you come back, next time around it may be five breaths. At least you’re heading in the right direction. Learn how not to get discouraged. You find that over time, as you’re sitting here, you can get more and more continually focused on the breath. Well, the same principle applies outside. As you’re walking around, as you’re taking on duties, the mind will slip off. It’ll forget itself. And as soon as you remember, just come right back to the breath. Here you may want to have a shorthand version of your meditation. A shorthand version of your meditation as you sit, because you do have other things to do. So you want to learn how to figure out what are the essentials for keeping the mind centered, keeping it solid, keeping it aware of itself as you take on other duties. One is to have a range of images that you have in the mind about what the breath is doing as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Then figure out which image is right for which activity. One image I found useful is to remind yourself that the breath doesn’t have any clear boundaries. It’s a field of energy. Energy doesn’t have the clear boundaries, say, that a cell does. So think of yourself walking through the day in a cloud of breath energy and figure out how to make it as peaceful and as coordinated as possible. In other words, the cloud is not a storm cloud. It’s a peaceful cloud. And within that cloud you’ll find that you have certain parts of the body that are more sensitive to the breath than the others. Those are the parts that tend to seize up. Say, when something makes you a little bit angry, it gives rise to a little bit of desire or fear. Those spots can be your centers, and you want to keep in touch with them. Even if you lose focus on the body as a whole, make sure that you’re sensitive to those spots. And as soon as anything tightens up inside them, relax. Tightens up again, relax. At first you’re going to have to ask yourself, “Why is it tightening up?” Just take it as a sign that something came into the mind. It’s an old habitual way of thinking, an old habitual way of relating to the body. Then you just breathe right through it. Drop it, drop it, drop it. Make that center in the body, that sensitive spot, as open and wide and as comfortable as you can. Then try to protect that. That’s one shorthand way of doing it. Another is, if you have some mental work you have to do, give yourself frequent breaks. As long as you’re focused on the job at hand, you’re doing okay. If you find your mind wandering, ask yourself, “Why can’t it wander to the breath?” But then every now and then, give yourself regular intervals throughout the day when you stop. And get in touch with how the breath energy is going in the body. Because mental work does take a lot out of the energy of the breath. I read a Chinese treatise on medicine one time, and they were saying that mental work takes three times as much energy out of the body as physical work does, because it doesn’t stop. You’ve been shoveling all day or working the fields all day. When you stop, you stop. But if you have mental work, you come to the end of the day and you carry the work home. It’s there in the back of the mind, sometimes in the front of the mind, taking up energy. So remind yourself, you have to take regular breaks to rest and restore. But the important thing is that you find that being with the breath is energizing, so it has to be comfortable, it has to be nourishing for this to work. Otherwise you get frazzled. It’s like you’ve put the mind into a prison and you’re doing prison labor. And it’ll work for a while, but then it’ll want to rebel. So instead, give it a good place to stay. The important thing is that you don’t get discouraged by the fact that you’re not 100% present with the breath all through the day. Whatever percentage you can manage at any particular time, take it as a good sign. Because often the insights that come as you go through the day, trying to keep the mind centered, come in those little moments when the mind is about to slip off, and you catch it. And you begin to see, “Oh, this is the kind of thing that the mind does.” Or you can catch not only when it’s happening, but you also see why it’s happening. That question of the allure of things that you’re trying so hard to figure out, why the mind likes anger, why the mind keeps gravitating back towards fear. Sometimes when you’re not fully observant, fully vigilant, you catch things out of the corner of your eye. There’s that part of the mind that thinks it can slip past without you noticing. But you’re there, enough to see, “Oh, there’s this, there’s that.” “This is why I do this. This is why I say things this way. This is why I act in this way.” And it’s stupid. When you can see that, you’ve gained some important insights. John Sawat once said that his best insights came when he was doing walking meditation. Because when you’re doing walking meditation, you’re not only centered in the body, but you also have to be aware of the world outside. And you can catch the mind as it’s moving from inside to outside. You can see the times when something tries to slip in. In Thai they have the phrase “sumroi,” which means basically to step in the footsteps of someone else so that you can’t be detected. This is what a lot of our defilements do. As you’re innocently looking outside to make sure you’re not running into the end of the path, something else will come in. Well, if you can catch that, you’ve seen something that you wouldn’t have seen when the mind was fully here, sitting, with nothing else to do. It’s like being a teacher. Sitting meditation is like being in the room with the kids. So they behave themselves. When you’re doing meditation throughout the day, it’s as if you’re outside the room. You don’t see everything going on in the room, but every now and then you hear something, overhear something. The kids saying X, saying Y, things they wouldn’t say in your presence. But now you’ve caught them. Now you’ve seen what they’re all about. So even though the concentration or mindfulness you develop as you go through the day may not be perfect, still it helps you to see things you wouldn’t have seen if you’d just allowed the mind to wander as it liked. So an important part of sticking with the breath as you go through the day is not getting upset when you’re not there. Just take it in stride. At the same time, remember, as you stay with the breath, it gives you a new opportunity to relate to your body in a new way. The breath is gaya-sankara, but any movement of the body is also gaya-sankara. Any karma done by the body is gaya-sankara. Some people say that this means that gaya-sankara has two totally different meanings. But that’s not a useful way of looking at the issue. A more useful way is to realize that every movement of the body has to start with the breath. So while you’re with the breath, you’re back at square one, and you’re learning to relate to the body back from square one. It gives you a greater sense of being centered in the body, in touch with the body. As you go through the different postures of the day, you can do it with more fluidity, because you’re coming from a good place. And as you begin to see the little things slip in, you realize how important it is to maintain as much of this sense of being mindful throughout the day as you can. If it slips, well, pick it right back up. Have a positive attitude to this. You’re not standing over yourself with a whip. You’re learning to relate to your sense of the body, to your sense of yourself, as you go through the day in a new way. And that’s all for the good.

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