When the Thoughts Won’t Stop

November 19, 2018

Take some deep in-and-out breaths. Notice how it feels. Notice where you feel it. And ask yourself if it feels comfortable. How do you know? You watch it. Try to stay with the breath as much as you can. In the body, it’s easiest to stay focused, because when we talk about breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the sensation of energy, the movement that you feel in the stomach, in the chest, in the shoulders, in the head, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And you’ll find that sometimes you breathe in a way that’s nervous, or in a way that feels tight and constricted. Other times it’s more open. And one of the good things about the breath is that it’s one of the few bodily processes that you can actually control to some extent. So if you’re breathing in a way that doesn’t feel comfortable, you can change. Try shorter, longer, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Try to gain a sense of what the breath is. The body needs, right now, when you’re feeling tired, you want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re feeling tense, breathe in a way that’s more relaxed. Try to figure out what’s just right. It requires that you be very sensitive to how the breath feels, so you have to give it your full attention. The problem is that when you start training the mind like this, to stay with the breath, you begin to discover there are many minds. It’s like there’s a whole committee in there, lots of different people. Lots of different opinions. But you have to realize those opinions don’t destroy the breath. The breath is still there. It’s like one time I was teaching meditation in a college, and they gave us a room that had an extremely loud clock. After the session was over, everyone opened their eyes and said, “It’s that clock.” And I had to remind them, “Okay, the sound of the clock was there, but the breath was also there. The sound of the clock did not destroy the breath.” The thoughts that come into your mind right now, if they’re not related to the breath, they don’t destroy the breath. You simply don’t have to get engaged with them. They’re like little dogs on the side of the street, coming up and begging for food. If you feed them, they’ll keep coming back, coming back, coming back. If you don’t feed them, they’ll whine and whimper for a while. But then after a while, when they see that there’s no food to be had, they’ll leave. It’s the same with these thoughts. If you give them attention, you turn them into long strings of thought. That means they’re going to keep coming. But if you don’t pay them any attention, they’ll begin to get lighter, more infrequent. They may not go away entirely, but at least they’ll give you some space to stay with the breath and not be so bothered. In the meantime, while they’re still coming, there are a couple things you can think about. One is that you can think of your awareness of the breath as being like the frame of a window. There are going to be sounds coming in through the window, wind coming in through the window, bugs flying back and forth through the window. But the frame of the window doesn’t get disturbed by these things. It doesn’t try to get in the way. It doesn’t have to comment on them. It doesn’t try to disturb us. We’re disturbing the sounds. In other words, we’re constantly making a commentary on them. It’s the same with these thoughts that come into the mind, these images. We don’t have to comment on them to say whether they’re good or bad. Just notice that they’re there, but let them be in the background. They’re flowing through the window, but you stay with the frame. The frame is your larger awareness of the body as it’s breathing in, breathing out. Another point to remind yourself is that in the Buddhist analysis, what we experience right now is the result of two things, actions in the present moment and actions coming from the past. You can’t go back and change your past actions, but you can change your present actions. So in these thoughts, as they first appear, they are the result of your old actions. Your mind has this habit. It’s been thinking for who knows how long, talking to itself, commenting, commenting on its comments, commenting on its comments, about its comments, many layers of discussion. So as you sit down to meditate, this new committee member is going to be easily overwhelmed by the old committee members, the decisions you’re making right now. But you have the choice right now. You can go with the thoughts or not. A thought presents itself, as if saying, “Here, I am. You can think about me if you want, but we don’t have to.” You can say, “No, thank you. Stay with the breath. No, thank you. Stay with the breath.” And they may get more insistent sometimes. Other times they’ll be weaker. But the important thing is not to get upset by them. Just think of them as being there in the background. As I said, your mind is like many minds. It’s like a committee. And this new committee member, the one that wants to meditate, is like any new committee member in a committee where some of the old members are really established. It doesn’t know its friends yet. It doesn’t know who it can trust and who it can’t trust. But as long as you’re determined to be observant and to stick with this committee member, you begin to weaken the other ones. And you’ll find that just by staying with the breath may not be enough. But you have to remind yourself of these things. That just because a thought comes in doesn’t mean you have to engage it. And because it appears now doesn’t mean it was a choice you made now for it to appear. It’s based on old habits. So you’re not really committed to continue with these thoughts, to get involved. And you don’t have to wipe them out. They’ll come and they’ll go, like the sounds in the background. It’s like reading a book. There’ll be sounds in the background. Sometimes people come in and go out of the room where you are. But you keep focused on what you’re reading. You may lose focus for a bit, but you can pick it up again. It’s the nature of concentration that it starts with little bits of concentration. It goes for a little while, then stops. Then it starts up again, then it stops. And what you’re doing is taking those little bits of concentration and you’re stitching them together so they form one continuous line. So just because your concentration comes and goes, don’t get upset by it. Just keep coming back, coming back. And as the breath gets more comfortable, it gets easier to stay. You might look at the breath in different parts of the body. When you breathe in, how does it feel in your stomach? How does it feel in your chest? How does it feel in your head? Anywhere? Any unnecessary tension? Can you relax it? Can you breathe in a way where the whole stomach and the whole chest feels refreshed? The whole body feels refreshed? The whole purpose of the concentration is to give the mind a place where it feels good to stay here in the present moment. This is one of the reasons why we have thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of the concentration. Try to wish everybody well. May everyone find true happiness. That’s a good thought. It’s a comfortable thought. You realize you don’t have any animosity toward anyone. And if in the course of your efforts to stay with the breath a picture of someone comes up, someone you like, someone you don’t like, someone you’ve lost, someone who’s still around, just wish them goodwill. May you be happy. And then get back to the breath. This way you learn how to cut through some of the storylines that the mind might build up. It’s not that thinking is bad. It’s simply that we tend to think in ways that are harmful to us. Sometimes not, sometimes yes. And you want to have some control so that when a harmful thought comes up, you’re able to step out easily. When a good thought comes up, a useful thought comes up, it’s perfectly fine to think. In fact, if you’ve been meditating and the mind has been still, it’s a lot easier to think clearly about the things you really have to think about. The mind has been rested. It’s very self-aware. It’s alert to how a thought begins and how it’s going to go. And when the thought is completed, it can say, “The thought is done. I don’t have to think it anymore.” You can put it aside. You’ve got to be more orderly in the way you run your mind. And then you protect the mind. It doesn’t have to think about anything. It’s perfectly fine just to be with the breath. We’ve all had those moments ever since childhood. Every now and then we realize the mind hasn’t been thinking. It feels kind of strange if you haven’t stopped thinking intentionally. There’s a part of the mind that says, “Where am I when I’m not thinking?” It’s as if we identify with these different voices in the mind. For the time being, have a new voice, the voice that says, “I want to meditate.” You can identify with that voice. When the other thoughts come up, the other voices come up, you don’t have to fight them. Some people complain that when they try to meditate to get the mind to calm down, they begin to see how uncalm the mind is. Well, it’s good that you see it, but you don’t have to fight things. Just notice, “Oh, the mind is wandered off.” You just drop it. And you’ll be right back. You’re learning a new habit. It’s going to take time. You don’t have to feel like you’re being pulled back and forth. The thoughts may run out, but you don’t have to run after them. Let them go. And bit by bit by bit, the mind will get more used to being right here. It’ll feel more and more at home right here. It’ll feel more in control. It sees the thought come up, and you can see right through it. In other words, you see where it’s going to lead. You realize, “I don’t have to go there.” You don’t have to straighten out the thought. That’s one problem. Sometimes we feel a thought comes up and it’s incomplete and it’s not quite right. We feel we have to straighten it out. You can leave the ends dangling. The thoughts are incomplete. They’re not needed right now. The only thinking you want to do is thinking about the breath, how you can be more snugly with the breath, more at ease with the breath. Think of the breath surrounding you as you breathe in, surrounding you as you breathe out, with a nice cocoon of good breath energy. Disturbing thoughts will get further and further away. It may take time, but in the meantime, the fact that they’re coming in and going out … Remember the image of the window. You stay with the frame. The frame is your awareness of the body, the awareness of the breath. The wind’s going to come in and go out. The bugs are going to come in and go out. The sound’s going to come in and go out. That’s their business. You don’t have to get involved. Just because something comes up in the mind doesn’t mean you have to be responsible for it. Again, think of the committee. You can have all kinds of strange committee members in there. You can let them chatter, but you don’t have to get involved with their chatter. When you’re thinking this way, even though there may be thoughts coming through the mind, there can be a sense of peace and a sense of feeling solidly grounded right here. And that’s a sign that the concentration is beginning to take hold.

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