Bewildered by Your Mind

April 14, 2019

It’s been a busy day. Now it’s time for the mind to rest. But rest in a way where you’re alert and you know what’s going on. Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing right now. And ask yourself if it’s comfortable. If it’s not comfortable, you can change. If it is comfortable, try to maintain it. And as that sense of comfort stays, you can think of it spreading. That it’s spread through the arms, the legs, the torso, through your head. So you feel balanced right here. It feels good. Your awareness is filling the body. This is the best way for the mind to rest. It’s healing for the mind. We can rest and sleep, but we don’t learn anything. But if you rest in this way, you begin to know your own mind. And you begin to realize there are parts of the mind that are like your friends and others that are not so friendly. Otherwise, they get you to do things that you’re going to regret later. You want to know that. Because when you know your own mind, then you can learn how to solve the problem of suffering. We all come into life. Imagine what it’s like being born. You get squeezed through the birth canal after you’ve been sitting around doing nothing for a while. All of a sudden, you’re out in the world where the air is attacking your skin. And you don’t have that sense of support and security that you had before. Birth is painful. Aging is painful. Illness is painful. Death is painful. But it’s especially bad at birth because we don’t know what’s going on. We’re totally clueless. As the Buddha said, our reaction to pain is bewilderment. We don’t understand. As soon as we get a sense that there are other people around us, our question is, “What can they do to tell us how not to suffer?” How can they help? Even before we know that there are other people, we look to our parents. What can they do to help get us past this pain? This is where human beings are better than animals. Animals never get past that stage. There’s no way you can explain things to animals. So they go through life bewildered. Of course, human beings can at least begin to figure things out. One of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha was because he was the first human being who figured out pain. Why it happens, now we don’t know. We don’t have to suffer from it. Otherwise, there could be physical pains in the body, but the mind doesn’t suffer. And that’s a skill that’s really good to know. And as he said, the pain may be there in the body, but the suffering is in the mind. And the suffering is caused by the mind. It’s not caused by the physical pain outside. It’s caused by the way we latch onto things. We assume this is this and that’s that, and it has to be this way. It has to be that way, and then it’s not that way. Then we suffer. That’s what his image is like. It’s as if we’re being shot by two arrows. First the arrow of the physical pain, and then the mind shoots itself again. Sometimes it seems to me a little bit too meager. We shoot ourselves with many arrows. The things we tell ourselves about how it’s not fair, this is not good, this is not right, why is this pain attacking me? We have all kinds of ideas we picked up from that time early on when we didn’t really understand pain. We may think that the pain has a bad intention toward us, and the mental image we may have of the pain is something solid that’s invaded our space. We can suffer from that too. So you want to learn how to look at your mind so you can begin to see how you create suffering. How do you create suffering around pain? How do you create suffering around things out in the world not going the way you want them to be? This is why when we meditate, we want to not only rest but also be alert. Because it’s the little movements in the mind that are going to make the difference between whether we suffer or not. So watch your mind. If it’s going to sneak off away from the breath, just bring it right back. Sometimes it’ll sneak off when you’re not looking, which means you have to look carefully, consistently. One way to stay with the breath consistently is to realize that the breath does have an effect on your health and has a general effect on your sense of well-being right here, right now. So what way of breathing would give rise to a sense of well-being? One way of breathing would maintain that sense of well-being. That’s something you can take an interest in. When you take an interest in the breath, that helps you to stay alert. The one thing you have to watch out for is, as the breath gets comfortable, especially if you’re tired at the end of the day, it’s very easy to start drifting off. You forget about the breath and you just go for the sense of ease. And this is how we fall asleep anyhow, so it’s very easy. Be careful and very alert to remind yourself that you’re going to stay with the breath. You’re here with the body. You’re here meditating. You’re not just resting, you’re meditating. The word that the Buddha used for meditation, bhavana, means that you’re developing good qualities in the mind. You’re developing your alertness, you’re developing your mindfulness, your ability to keep things in mind. You’re developing your concentration. You’re developing a quality called ardency, which means you’re trying to do this well. Because, after all, the happiness of the mind depends on this. We all too often believe that our happiness depends on this person or that person or things outside being a certain way. But if that’s where our happiness is based, it’s going to suffer. Because anything outside that you can base your happiness on is going to suffer. It’s going to change. Sometimes it changes slowly, sometimes it changes fast. So what you’ve got to find is something inside that you can base your happiness on, something you can rely on. And you look at your mind and you say, “My mind’s not all that reliable right now.” Well, you can make it reliable through this quality. It’s called ardency. So take this time to get to know your mind. Once you’ve made up your mind that you’ve got to stay right here, you begin to see things in the mind you didn’t see before, especially the way the mind sneaks off. In the past, we enjoyed it. Sometimes we were miserable by the way our mind was wandering around. But we just accepted, “Well, that’s the way the mind is.” But that’s like accepting that you have a dog in your house and sometimes it’s nice and sometimes it makes a mess on the carpet. If you’re at it, you say, “Well, that’s just the nature of the dog.” You’re going to have a lot of trouble living with the dog. But if you can train the dog, the dog knows where to go and where not to go, then it’s a lot easier to live with the dog. And the same with your own mind. Once your mind is trained, it’s a lot easier to live together. You’re not shooting yourself with arrows all the time. So take this time to get to know your mind, where it’s trustworthy and where it’s not. Because the mind has all kinds of potentials. There’s a passage where the Buddha says, “Think of the animal world. There are all kinds of animals. And where do they come from? They come from minds. Each animal has a mind, and before they were born they had a mind. And there’s something in the mind that wanted to be like that.” You can have all kinds of different things. So you’ve got all these potentials in here, and you have to learn which ones are worth following and which ones are not. We sometimes think that animals have things easy. They don’t have to figure out anything. They just live by their instincts. But again, they’re in bewilderment. They don’t know what they’re doing. They have a few ideas about what’s pleasant and what’s not pleasant, but there’s nobody to explain anything to them. I know some Zen teachers who say that animals don’t suffer because they don’t have any sense of self. Well, they do have a sense of self. They defend their territory. They defend their bodies. They hold on really tight. They live in fear. They know they live in danger. And they’re bewildered by it. And human beings who don’t try to understand the cause of suffering are pretty much like animals. They just go by their instincts. Or they pick up an idea. They pick up an idea here and an idea there, and they patch them together in any old which way. But they’re still bewildered. So the reason we watch our minds is so that we’re not bewildered by our own minds, so that the different potentials in the mind begin to make sense. In other words, you can begin to see which parts of the mind you can trust and which ones you can’t. What good things the mind can do when it’s trained that you didn’t realize it could do before. That’s why you’re not bewildered by your mind. You can be friends with your mind. Because you understand what’s going on inside. So the meditation is here to get you right here where you can watch the mind. And it gives you some tools for asking questions about the mind. But first we focus on the breath to get the mind to settle in. So for the time being, ask questions about the breath. Is it comfortable? Is it not comfortable? Can the mind stay there? This is when the mind comes in. Watch out for the mind when it wanders off, because that’s when it’s looking for trouble. You’re here doing something good, so don’t waver away. There was one time an elephant trainer came to see the Buddha. He said, “Elephants are easy. It’s the human beings that are hard. People could bring them a wild elephant, and within seven days he would know all that elephant’s tricks.” In other words, the ways that the elephant would try to get out of the training, avoid the training. And the elephant trainer had them all figured out. He wasn’t fooled by the elephant. But he said, “Human beings are a lot more complex. It’s just no wonder we’re bewildered by our own minds, even though we have people to explain things to us.” So here’s a chance to get to know your mind and learn how to see through its tricks. That’s how you can bring about some peace and honesty inside. When the mind is honest with itself, peaceful, it’s going to cause a lot less problems. So we have this human potential. We live in a birth where we can understand suffering and we can understand how to stop it. So take advantage of this opportunity while you have it.

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