Boundaries

October 7, 2019

When you’re meditating, it’s easy to get discouraged when you see there are lots of things happening in the mind that are not related to the breath. And you wonder, “When is the mind going to quiet down? When am I going to get some concentration?” Well, the Buddha uses a word that gives you an idea of what you should be doing. It’s called anupasana. To follow and to watch. So even though the breath is only one of the things happening in the body right now, only one of the things that you’re going to be aware of right now, and thoughts about the breath are only one type of thought that’s happening in the mind right now, you choose to stay with just that one thing and to keep following it from one second to the next. From one second to the next, to the next, without any gaps. Try to make it as continuous as possible. And that’s how the concentration is going to arise, even though there may still be other things happening in the mind, other things happening in the body. The fact that you’re focused on one thing and sticking with it, that’s what you’re here for. Similarly, you’re not interested in the other things that are happening. After all, you can’t turn off your ears. I mean, there are states of concentration where your ears stop hearing things, but it’s not a necessary part of the path. So you still hear sounds. There may be little thoughts nibbling away at the edge of your awareness, but you stay focused on the breath. You maintain your original determination, because you know your boundaries. You know what’s appropriate right now and what’s not, what’s in line with what you intended to do and what’s not. This quality of knowing your boundaries is important. It’s something that starts with the outside level of the practice. Remember that image of the fortress that has a moat and has a road around it? That stands for shame and compunction. Shame is a sense that certain activities are beneath you. Compunction is the fear that comes with the realization that if you do something unskillful, there are going to be bad results. We usually think of these qualities in terms of actions in the body, words you might say. But it also applies to the mind, especially when you’re sitting here meditating, because you have a sense of shame. You have a sense of shame and compunction around the times when the mind wants to wander off away from the breath. Here you are. You’ve worked this hard to get here, to meditate, and then you fritter away your time thinking about other things. And you miss out on the opportunity to develop some skills that would really be useful for you. So use these qualities of shame and compunction to keep directing the mind back to the work that needs to be done. But at the same time, you want to develop an interest in the breath and a sense of the different things that are possible. After all, there’s long breathing and short breathing, or in long, out short, in short, out long. And there’s nobody to tell you that you have to prefer one kind of breath to another, or how long your breath should be. That’s for you to decide on your own. And if you can’t make up your mind, well, try out different things until you can begin to gain a sense that this kind of breathing feels good for the body and that doesn’t feel quite so good. Then you go with what feels better. And if it turns out it doesn’t feel better very long, well, you’re still free to change. The more you can get interested in the breath, the easier it is not to get interested in other things. So the way you breathe, the way the breath energy goes through the body, it’s bound to have a big impact on the health of the body and on the ability for the mind to settle down and find a sense of contentment here in the present moment, to stay in its territory. The Buddha gives an analogy. It’s a story he tells about a quail. Usually it lives in a field that’s been plowed. All the stones have been turned up by the plow. And one day he leaves the field and goes off to a meadow nearby. A hawk comes swooping down, catches him, and carries him off. And the quail starts complaining, “Oh, if I hadn’t left my ancestral home, this hawk would have been no match for me.” That peaks the hawk. So he asks, “Where is your ancestral home?” And the quail says, “It’s a field down there with the stones all turned up by the plow.” The hawk lets him go, “Go back to your field, but even there you won’t escape me.” So the quail gets down, stands on the stone, and starts taunting the hawk, “Come and get me, hawk! Come and try and get me, hawk!” The hawk swoops down. The quail sees that the hawk is coming at full speed and hides behind the stone. The hawk doesn’t have any brakes, so he smashes his breast. He smashes his breast against the stone and dies. Now, the field here stands for the body as you experience it in the present moment, your awareness in the present moment. The areas outside of the field are thoughts about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations that you like and don’t like. The hawk stands for Mara, who is the force of evil in the Buddhist teaching. Mara can get you if your thoughts are wandering around, but if you keep them in line, keep them in their right place, then he can’t get you. So have a sense of your boundaries. Have a sense of where you should be and where you should not be. And you keep yourself safe. Now, within where you should be, learn how to exercise your ingenuity. Because the mind ordinarily doesn’t like being hemmed in like this, and if it has a feeling of being hemmed in, it’s going to rebel. But if you show it that there’s something really interesting in your territory, then it’s willing to stay. It’s like having a piece of land, but you don’t pay any attention to it. You don’t pay attention to your own piece of land. You pay attention to other people’s pieces of land. Of course, they don’t like your meddling in their affairs. And whatever you grow there, they’re going to take, because it’s theirs. And then you suddenly realize that you’ve got land and you can grow anything you want there. If the soil isn’t good, well, you can improve the soil. If there’s no water, you can bring in water through irrigation. In other words, you can take what doesn’t seem all that promising and you can turn it into something good, if you pay attention to its possibilities. And one of the reasons we listen to the Dhamma is to gain a sense of possibilities we might not have known before. It’s like if you’re trying to stay with one spot. Some people find themselves getting irritated by that, or it’s hard to really settle down, because it doesn’t feel their awareness. I knew this old teacher one time—this was back when I was first learning how to meditate. She was retired, living in Watasokonam. And she got into concentration really fast. And she said her trick was not to look at one spot in the body, but to look at two at the same time, in the middle of the head and in the base of the spine. And to think of a line connecting the two, and just staying right there with those two spots with a line connecting them, like an electric wire connecting the poles of a battery. She said her awareness would light up. So that’s a trick you can try. If you can’t find any one spot where you want to stay focused, well, try two. And the amount of concentration and interest that is required to keep the two spots going can settle you down. So have a sense of your boundaries, the places where you should not go, and develop a sense of the potentials in the areas where you should go. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. After all, when the Buddha gained awakening, where did he gain it? Right here, where his awareness was with the breath. But the important thing is he didn’t let himself get distracted with anything else that was right here. That’s when he was able to learn about the breath. Use what he’d learned about the breath. So that after he gained awakening, he could walk around India for forty-five years. So we have the same potentials right here. But because we’re interested in so many other things all at the same time, we don’t get to really explore these potentials. So if you limit the range of where you’re going to wander and pay careful attention to what you’ve got right here, you’ll find lots of potentials that you didn’t expect. Things that have been right here, right before your eyes all the time. But you’ve been looking away, looking away. This is one of the reasons why anapasana means looking continually. All too often our concentration is like phrases in music. It goes for a while, then stops. Then goes for a while, then stops. Goes for a while, then stops. And in the stopping, interesting things are happening, but you’re not paying attention. So try to make the mind, your awareness, your learning, as continuous as possible. There are no stops, no rests, no gaps. Now, whatever’s happening here, in terms of how the mind shapes its experience, will all become clear. All because you’ve learned your boundaries and stuck with them, and made the most of what’s inside the boundaries, and not concerning yourself with what’s out. (crickets chirping)

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