Respect the Breath & You Can Play Together

February 1, 2020

As the chant said just now, try to approach your concentration practice with a sense of respect. This means having respect for your mind, its potentials for finding true happiness, and respect for the breath. You’re going to be spending a lot of time with the breath. And so the more you respect it, the more you’re going to learn. In other words, give it your full attention and try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels. Start out with a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel it in the body. And if the long breathing feels good, keep it up. When it starts getting tiresome, you can change. You can make the breath shorter or shallower. Or faster, slower, heavier, or lighter. You can experiment for a while. See what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. And if you respect the breath, you can play with it. It’s like being a child, learning how to play with other children. If you respect their rights, you can play together well. Have a good time. If you simply come in and try to force the breath to be coming in and out in some preconceived way, it’s not going to play along very well. But if you’re sensitive, does long breathing feel good? Okay, stay with it. If it doesn’t feel good at the moment, you can change. You’re taking a proactive approach. You’re giving the mind a good place to settle down. That’s part of what the Buddha calls direct thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate it. The more sensitive you can be in your evaluation, the more refined the breath will be, the more refined the pleasure will be. That comes from the breathing. What you’re doing is you’re taking a very common activity of the mind. Talking to yourself and using it for a higher purpose. The mind tends to chatter throughout the day about all kinds of things—meaningful things, meaningless things. It tends to be pretty random. Now you’re going to focus in on one thing. You’re going to be mindful, which means that you keep in mind that you’re going to stay here. And you’re going to be alert. You watch what’s happening. And you’re going to be ardent. You’re trying to do this well. That’s where the sensitivity and the respect come in. Once the breath feels good, try noticing how it feels in different parts of the body. You can make a survey. Start down around the navel, move up the front of the torso, into the head, then down the back. Down the shoulders, out the arms, out the legs. Notice how the flow of energy feels as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And if the breath is comfortable, think of the comfortable breath sensation going down those different parts of the body. Because what you want is a state where your awareness fills the body, a sense of ease fills the body. And the breath is a solvent for getting the awareness and the ease into the body like that. And then you try to maintain that. That’s another function of mindfulness. You know if something is good, you try to maintain it. This is very different from how you ordinarily hear mindfulness defined and its role defined. Today I was reading a little article on mindfulness. I was trying to define mindfulness, saying that it basically requires an attitude of equanimity. You just accept what’s there. And if you’d like things to change, you just drop that like. If you like things, you drop the liking. If you don’t like things, you drop the disliking. You just accept what’s there. But the Buddha never taught mindfulness that way. Equanimity, acceptance, has its place, but it’s not always skillful. One of the Buddha’s images is of a goldsmith. The goldsmith puts the gold in the fire, then takes it out and looks at it. If it’s in good shape, then he puts it in water. If it’s not, he puts it back in the fire again. If he simply leapt it and the fire would burn, if he simply looked at it, nothing would happen. If he stuck it in the water, nothing would happen. Putting the gold in the fire stands for the effort you put into meditation. Looking at it is equanimity, and cooling it down is concentration. This is where mindfulness is headed. To get there, you want to balance these three qualities. You use your equanimity to look at things in a fair way. But then you decide that if something’s wrong, you’ve got to change it. That’s what the persistence is for. If something is right, you want to maintain it. That’s what the concentration is for. These three qualities work together. There’s another place where the Buddha says, “If you notice that your mind has too much energy, that’s the time for calming it down, trying to develop some equanimity.” If it has too little energy, you don’t try to develop equanimity. You put more effort in. Mindfulness is something separate from both of those qualities. It watches to see at what time which quality is right. So in that case, you judge things by your level of energy. In the first case, you try to get all those qualities to work together. So you can watch, and put effort in, and then watch again, and cool things off. So we’re learning a skill. And as with any skill, you have to realize that there’s a time and place for different qualities. And you want to make sure that you gain a sense of what is the right time and what is the right place, just to accept things. And what is the right time and place to say, “No, I’m not going to accept this. I’m going to change things.” You accept the fact that things are the way they are, but you don’t stay there. You recognize that they’re there, but your attitude is, “If something’s wrong, the mind can’t settle down, you’ve got a problem, and you want to figure it out.” This way you use all your mind. You don’t turn off your thinking. You just learn how to use your thinking in a skillful way. When things go well, you can put a lot of your thinking aside and just be with a sense of well-being. But try to stay alert. Try to stay mindful. So you don’t drift off into what’s called delusion concentration, where things are very still, very quiet, but you’re not really sure of where you are. You can’t really say where you’re focused. What’s happened is you’ve dropped the breath, you’ve dropped your mindfulness, you’ve dropped your alertness, and you just go into the comfort. You forget your work. In other words, you’re simply cooling the goal down. And nothing happens. Sometimes you come out of a state like that and you’re not really sure. Were you awake? Were you asleep? It wasn’t quite asleep, but it wasn’t quite awake either. That’s not what you want. You want a state of mind that is alert and balanced and very sensitive to what it’s doing and to what the breath is doing. So you approach this with respect, by being sensitive, by being attentive. And being mindful not simply to accept things, but mindful to remember there are ways of dealing with any imbalance in the mind, any imbalance in the body. And as you meditate, you’re going to get a better and better sense of how to bring things into balance. After all, this is a middle way. If it were just a way of acceptance, it wouldn’t be in the middle of anything. If it were just a way of pushing and pushing and pushing, that wouldn’t be middle either. You bring these three qualities together—your persistence, your equanimity, and your concentration. That way you can get the goal to do what you want. So treat your mind like gold. Show it some respect. It’s valuable. Be sensitive to what it needs. Be sensitive to what the body needs in terms of the breath. Gain an interest in what the breath can do for the body and the mind. Because concentration practice, if it’s simply based on forcing things, will make things burn up. It’s best if you have a sense of interest. After all, this is the breath energy in the body. This is what keeps the body and the mind together. This is what enables the blood to circulate through the body, for you to have feeling in your body, for you to move your body around. It’s a basic necessity of life. And if you pay attention to it, it can do more for you than just keep you alive. It can create a sense of well-being, food for the mind. So as you deal with things outside, you’re not so hungry for immediate pleasures as you’ve got something good inside. It’s like taking a trip and taking good food along with you. You go to an area where there are no restaurants. Or where the restaurant food is really bad. Or places where it’s actually bad for you. But you’re in no danger because you’ve got your own food. Getting the mind into concentration is like that. You’ve got a sense of well-being that you can generate anywhere. And then you show it some respect. If you respect the breath, you respect the mind, you can get them to play together. You can play with them. And everybody benefits.

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