To Develop the Mind

August 27, 2021

Meditation instructions often start by saying to watch the breath. But you have to understand that in a figurative way. Don’t have the picture of your being up in your eyes or in your head looking at the breath further down in the body. Think of yourself inhabiting the whole body. And the breath is not just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the way you feel the movement of energy through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And you can feel that anywhere in the body. Think of being bathed by the breath. And then try to stay here. Getting into position in meditation is not that hard. It’s staying in position. That’s the hard part. But it’s helped by the way you approach the meditation, the way you think about it. First, about the way you think about the breath. Ask yourself, “What kind of quiet mind feel good right now?” Notice where the breathing is most prominent. Put your attention there. And ask yourself, “Is it comfortable?” Does it feel too long or too short? It’s good to start with some long breaths to energize the body. Because ultimately you’re going to be wanting to calm things down. And if you’re already a little bit sluggish, a little bit sleepy, and you try to calm things down from there, you just fall asleep. Or you drift off into a deluded state where you’re still, but you’re not really clear about where you are. You want to be fully alert, fully mindful. So energize the body first by the way you breathe. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, then you can gradually let it get shorter, or more shallow, or deeper. Faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. Keep remembering to stay here. This is the task of mindfulness. Sometimes we hear that mindfulness means simply being accepting of whatever comes up. But the Buddha never defined the term in that way, and he never used it in that way. For him, mindfulness is a quality of the memory. So what do we remember as we’re trying to stay in the present moment? We’re trying to remember what to do, and what we’re here for. We’re here to get the mind to settle down. So if it hasn’t settled down yet, you do what you can to get it to be comfortable here. That’s one of the reasons why we adjust the breath. Once it’s here, you try to maintain it. When you do that, the Buddha says you have mindfulness as your governing principle, in charge of what the mind is doing. You combine that with alertness, noticing what you’re actually doing, and an ardency, which is the wholehearted desire to do this well. This is going to involve some effort on your part, but it’s effort in something that’s comfortable, something that’s stabilizing. It’s not the kind of effort that wastes your energy. In fact, this is the kind of effort that gives rise to more energy. Think of the word for meditation in Pali, bhavana. It means to bring something into being, or to develop something. Just watching what’s already there, you realize that there are potentials in the body and potentials in the mind, and they can be developed. You have this potential with the breath. You can breathe in ways that feel really satisfying. Think of your whole torso, your whole abdomen, refreshed by each breath as it comes in. What would feel refreshing? Well, breathe in that way. You can think of the breath energy going down the spine, down the legs, or from the back of the neck, down the shoulders, down the arms. In the head you can think of the breath energy coming into the body, not only through the nose, but also through the eyes and the ears, in from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, going deep into the brain. In other words, you can use the breath to create a sense of well-being right here. And then you can let that sense of well-being spread. Ultimately you want to get to a point where you can be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. So your awareness fills the body, the breath fills the body, and a sense of ease fills the body. That’s the state you’re trying to give rise to here, the state you’re trying to develop. And as Ajahn Fu, my teacher, used to say, “There are three stages to meditation. One is learning how to do it, and then the next is learning how to maintain it.” How do you maintain this full body awareness? Because it does have a tendency to shrink. We’re very good at that. As soon as we want to think about something in the past or the future, we can’t be with a full body. We have to shrink our awareness down to something small, and then it can go. So if you notice that your awareness is beginning to shrink, expand it, expand it, expand it. And expanding it, you don’t have to put any pressure on the body. The same with the breath, that you would think of the breath going through the different parts of the body, this flow of energy. You don’t have to put pressure on things. Think of the body being porous. The breath can come in and go out. Through all your pores and then through all the little spaces inside the body. If you want, you can think of all the atoms and how each atom is composed of a lot of space. So there’s plenty of opportunity for the energy to flow. Just learn how to be with this. The mind will start complaining, “What’s next? What’s next? Isn’t there something else? Nothing’s happening.” And you tell it, “What’s happening is that I’m trying to master a skill, and this skill is learning how to be here patiently.” Because the next step after you’ve gotten the mind into position and then you try to maintain it in position, is to use the meditation. And the primary thing you want to use it for is gaining insights. Try to put the mind into position where it has a sense of well-being and it can see itself clearly. The combination, you feel good and everything’s clear, allows you to see things in the mind that ordinarily you might hide from yourself. Either because you haven’t been paying attention or you know, or part of you knows, that they’re there but you don’t want to admit them to yourself. This is why having a sense of well-being here is going to be important, because you will see things that the mind does that are less than honorable. Or try sneaking in some things that it knows are not skillful. And although it’s not pleasant to see those things, it’s good to be able to step back from them and say, “Okay, they’re there, but I don’t have to identify with them. I’ve got something better here. I’ve got all the thoughts that surround the breath, being with the breath.” This provides a sense of well-being. So you don’t have to look for well-being in other ways. But the insights, when they come, don’t come on schedule. You can’t tell yourself, “Tonight I’d like to have five good insights into why I do something.” But you can put the mind in a position where it’s likely to have insights, and then you try to maintain it. And when the insights come, you learn how to read them. Think about the Buddha, his ability to remember previous lifetimes. He could have just been amazed at all the different things he had been. But he didn’t use that knowledge in that way. When he would tell stories about his previous lifetimes, he’d talk about important lessons he had learned. In one case, it was about how insults are never useful. He remembered a lifetime when he’d been a bull. And he was a pretty amazing bull. He was able to plow huge areas of land in a very short time. In fact, his owner was so proud of him, he would go around and bet people, “I bet my bull can plow more than your bull can.” He got all the way to the king, and large amounts of money were placed on the bet. And so the owner turned to the bull and started shouting insults at it to make it go. Well, it didn’t go at all. And so the king’s bull was able to plow a lot more, and the king won all the money. So in the story, this is one of those stories where animals can talk. The owner goes back and he starts sulking, and the bull says, “Why are you sulking?” And the owner says, “You know, you should have been plowing.” And the bull says, “Why did you insult me, calling me a beast? If you want me to plow, speak to me nicely. Just go back and bet twice the amount now with the king, and he’ll plow for you. But speak to me nicely.” So the owner does, as the bull requests. And sure enough, the bull is able to beat the king ’s bull, and the owner gets the money back. Now the Buddha could have been amazed at all the different things he could have been. Think about that. Imagine remembering previous lifetimes. Remember when you were a common animal, when you were a deva, and getting really worked up about that. But the Buddha was able to see there’s a lesson here. He took the lesson and let the rest go. So when insights come, ask yourself, “What is the best use of this insight into my mind? To what extent is it true? To what extent is it not true?” Because not everything is 100% true across the board, aside from the Four Noble Truths. So we create the right conditions for insights to arise, but then we have to learn how to read them. So we get the most use out of them. Think of a jhanmun off in the forest. He would have visions of devas coming down and telling him how to do walking meditation, how to do sitting meditation. And again, he could have gotten all worked up about the fact that he was seeing devas. Or he could have believed 100% what they had to say. But he reminded himself. The whole point of having visions like this, or making the best use of them, is to see what Dharma lesson they have. And with every Dharma lesson, you have to put it to the test. If you follow their instructions, did his meditation go better? There are times when it did, and times when it didn’t. So again, fully trust everything that pops up into a quiet mind. But the fact that the mind is quiet means that more things have the opportunity to come. This is one of the ways in which the mind can communicate with itself. And if you’re in a good position like this, with a sense of well-being, it’s a lot easier to admit things that you’ve been doing that are not all that skillful, and not get blown away by them. So again, think of that word bhavana, to bring into being. You’re trying to bring into being a really good state of mind here. A sense of well-being in body and mind. That allows you to gain insights into what you’re doing, and insights into how you can create less and less stress and suffering for yourself, less and less trouble for the people around you. And you can do it in a way where the mind is happy to take the lessons. That’s a good state of mind to build.

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