To Quiet the Mind

May 22, 2023

One of the reasons why we meditate is to get the mind quiet and centered, so it’s not harassed by its random thoughts, worries. But to get the mind quiet, you can’t simply pull the plug, turn off the switch. You have to think your way to quiet. In other words, think thoughts that will reduce the number of thoughts, get you less and less interested in your normal ways of thinking. The Buddha recommends two approaches. One is before you settle in with your meditation topic. Another is to settle in and then see what comes up, deal with whatever pulls you away from the topic. The first approach, he says, is that you try to seclude yourself from sensuality and from unskillful mental qualities. Sensuality here is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—the food you’ll fix tomorrow, the food we had today, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—how you’d like to arrange them to be a certain way. A good way to counteract that kind of thinking is to remind yourself of the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, the drawbacks of allowing your mind to be eaten up by sensual thoughts. The Buddha gives a long list of analogies. First, he starts out by pointing out how so much of the trouble in the world comes from our fascination with sensuality. It’s for the sake of sensual pleasures that we work, and we work really hard. There’s no guarantee that we’ll get the results we want out of our work, or if we do, if we’ll be able to maintain them. It’s because of sensuality that husbands fight with wives, parents fight with children, brothers and sisters fight with each other, and then from the family it spreads out to the whole world. That’s why there are so many wars going on right now. You might say, “Well, my sensual thoughts are not going to lead to war.” But the fact that the mind is feeding on these things means that it’s feeding in an area where there’s a limited amount of resources. So there’s bound to be strife, bound to be conflict, one kind or another. Think of the Buddha’s image of the fish in the stream that’s dying up. They’re fighting one another to stay in that last little bit of water. They’re all going to end up dying anyhow, because the water’s going to dry up. All they’re left with is the karma of having fought with one another. One of the reasons why the Buddha left home was because he looked around and saw that everything in the world was laid claim to. People are laying claim to Antarctica. That wasn’t in his vision, but that’s one of the things that you think about. Why would anybody want to lay claim to that? That’s the nature of human beings. If they lay claim to things and you’re going to establish some sort of happiness in the world, you’re going to have to fight people off. So you develop a sense of dismay over that kind of pleasure. And then you think of all the drawbacks in terms of the analogies that he gives for sensuality. Thinking of sensual thoughts, he says, “It’s like a dog gnawing on bones that have no meat at all.” And in John Lee’s explanation of that, he says, “The only flavor the dog gets out of it is its own saliva.” That’s your sensual thoughts, the pleasure of your sensual thoughts. That’s your saliva. If you do get sensual pleasures that you want, you’re going to have to fight other people off. There’s an image of the hawk that carries off a piece of meat, and other hawks and crows come and attack it. And if it doesn’t let go, it could get killed. Or the man in a tree eating fruits in the tree. Another man comes along, knows that he can’t climb a tree but he does have an axe, he can cut the tree down. If the first man doesn’t get out, he’s going to get his arm smashed or his leg smashed. So it’s good to think about the drawbacks of sensuality. We find so much pleasure in thinking these thoughts, and we think we’re so clever at thinking them, that they lead to a lot of harm. I had a dream one time. I was in a lousy apartment building. And there were two types of people living in the apartment building. There were dreamers and there were gangsters. And something inside me said, “Good, this is the sensual world. This is what you’ve got—dreamers and gangsters.” Is that why you want your thoughts to wander around? When you can think in this way, and you’re preparing the mind to say, “Okay, enough of that. Let’s just be with the breath. Let’s just enjoy the pleasure in a way that doesn’t involve sensuality.” You can also think of what the Buddha said about unskillful qualities, which he defines basically as everything from wrong view through wrong mindfulness. You want to check and make sure that your views are right. One view that’s going to get in the way of the meditation is the view that, “Well, I can’t do this,” or, “It didn’t go well the last time. It’s not going to go well this time.” That’s a variety of wrong view. Skills are something that can be mastered. And even if you’re an old dog, you can learn new tricks. So you straighten out your views, develop some right resolve, spread thoughts of goodwill to everybody, and you’re going to look for happiness that doesn’t cause anybody any harm. And then you’re ready for the breath. When you start out, you can focus anywhere in the body where you feel the breathing. The commentaries say to focus on the tip of the nose or around the mouth, because that’s where you can feel the air. Well, the air moving in and out, where you feel that, that’s actually a tactile sensation. But in the suttas, when they talk about the in-and-out breath, they don’t list it under the six sense objects. They list it either as a form of fabrication, bodily fabrication, or as one of the elements in the body or properties of the body, the wind property. And those are things you can feel anywhere in the body at all. So notice, when you breathe in, where do you feel it? Where is it most comfortable to stay focused? When you’re with that kind of sensation, you can settle in and then allow your awareness to spread throughout the whole body. So it feels like the whole body is breathing in, the whole body is breathing out. And it feels good. You can adjust the breath any way you like. Make it long, make it short, make it fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, or shallow. You can spend the whole hour experimenting with this. And then when you find a rhythm of breathing, and it feels good, allow that sense of comfortable feeling to spread through the body, down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, to the tips of the fingers, all throughout the head, all throughout the chest, the stomach, the intestines. You’re trying to develop a state of mind that’s centered but broad. You’ve got your main focal point, but you’re aware of the whole body. It’s like a spider on the web. The spider’s in one spot, but it’s sensitive to the entire web. Or like this candle in the front of the room. The candle flame is in one spot, but its light spreads out through the entire room. And then try to maintain that. This is where you run into other ways that the mind can get unquiet and can stay with the breath for a while. And then suddenly find itself someplace else. When that happens, just bring the mind back. If it happens again, bring it back again. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels really good. And then stop with one breath that feels good. Each time you breathe in, ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel especially good for the body right now?” Get sensitive to the parts of the body that don’t seem to be normally involved in the breathing process and see how they can be brought in. In other words, try to make the breath interesting. Because our problem is that we’re too much interested in our thoughts. A little something comes up and you’ve got to look into it as if it were a little present. All of these little presents that the mind presents for itself are nothing but ashes. They’re little bubbles that break, nothing of any substance. But you will find sometimes that just coming back to the breath is not enough. There’s something that’s pulling the mind back, a particular thought, a particular issue that suddenly pops up from the day or from who knows when. The mind does have this habit. There can be issues that are lying dormant for a long time, and for some reason they just spring up and suddenly take over. When that happens, you have to remind yourself of the drawbacks. If you continue thinking those thoughts, what would happen to you? It’s certainly not going to take you anywhere good. So why get involved? Remind yourself that you have the option not to think that thought. And if it was allowed to be dormant for so long, you can let it stay dormant. Let’s think about that kind of thinking until you realize it’s not something you really want to get involved with. One of my favorite approaches is to ask myself, “If this were a movie, would I pay to watch it?” The answer is usually no. So why bother? Then get back to the breath. There will be times when thinking about the drawbacks of that thinking will make it go away, but you can just decide, “Well, let it stay in the background.” You don’t have to get involved. It may have one part of your mind, but another part of the mind can stay with the breath. So make your primary focus the breath. Thoughts that are coming through the mind, you don’t have to get involved with them. They’re like stray dogs coming for food. And if you pay attention to them, even the amount of attention to drive them away, you’re feeding them. So just stop feeding them. They’ll hang around for a while, and they actually may do more obstreperous things to get your attention. So remind yourself, “I don’t have to go there. I’ve got the breath.” And after a while, they’ll begin to grow calm. This is an area where you have to be patient. Now, while they’re growing calm, you may begin to realize that that kind of thinking is associated with patterns of tension in different parts of the body, areas where the breath hasn’t been flowing properly. So you try to relax them by breathing through them. Think of whatever words are there in the thoughts, just being scattered or shattered as you breathe through them. So they’re just noise. They don’t make any sense. They don’t have any meaning. And as you relax around those ways of thinking, you deprive them of their anchor in the body. And if they don’t, your final weapon is to just grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and tell yourself, “I will not think those thoughts.” And then repeat a meditation word really fast, like bhutto, “rapid fire,” like a machine gun. Don’t give them any time to slip in. Do that for a while. And sometimes that can clear the air. And usually one of these techniques will work. And if they don’t work, you can work variations on them so they are appropriate for you. So what this means is that if you’re going to get to the point where the mind stops all of its random thoughts and just stays with the thinking about the breath, there will come times when you have to think about not thinking or think about de-thinking. In other words, shred the thoughts. As I said, think of the breath going through them and shattering them, or just the fact that you’re aware of them shatters them. Because a lot of times when we’re engaged in these kinds of thinking, we’re playing along with them. We’re playing a game. As John Suet mentioned this one time, he said, “Our perceptions are like a game we play with ourselves.” That’s what I mean. It’s like little kids playing. They say, “You be the doctor, I’ll be the nurse, or find someone else to be the patient.” It’s kind of a make-believe. And as long as you make-believe together, you can play together. The bad thing is, look, who are you playing with? You’re playing with your distracting thoughts. So the best way to end the game is to reflect. Refuse to go along with the made-up meanings. Refuse to understand what they’re saying. Then you find that you can begin to stand outside your thoughts. They may be there, but they’re not taking over. You’re headed in the right direction. So, learn how to make the breath interesting. Prepare yourself before you settle down with the breath. This is one of the reasons why we have those chants. You stop and think about it. The world is swept away. So the next time you think about the world again, it’s going to get swept away. Think about people you know in the world. They’re going to get swept away. Issues in the world outside, they’re going to get swept away. So don’t be swept away. You stay right here. This is your island, as the Buddha said. So make it strong. Make it sturdy. And if anything comes up to eat away at the shore, okay, you have your techniques for not giving in, for not getting back down into the river. And if you approach the meditation this way, the mind will settle down. It will grow calm, get centered, concentrated. It will be sturdy. Just be confident that this is something you can do. And that’s half the battle right there.

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