Your Own Governor

August, 2001

Focus your attention on the breath. There’s nothing else you have to think about right now. No other responsibilities. Just let the past and the future drop away. Even if there are thoughts that come into mind, just let them go their own way. You don’t have to chase them down. You don’t have to block them. They can come in, they can go out. You don’t have to be responsible for them either. The only thing you’re responsible for right now is being with the breath. Try to get on familiar terms with the breath. See what it feels like as it comes in, how it feels when it goes out. Try to look at the actual sensation of the breathing as opposed to your preconceived notions about how it should be. When it comes in, where do you know first that the breath is coming in? Where do you know first that the breath is going out? Anchor your awareness right in the actual sensation. If you find that the breath doesn’t feel comfortable, well, you can think of changing it. You can move your focus around until you find one spot in the body that’s easy to stay focused on. Most people usually start at the tip of the nose or at the abdomen, but there are lots of other spots in the body where you can watch the sensation of breathing. And you can try different rhythms of breathing. You don’t have to force the breath too much. Just think longer and see what happens as the breath goes longer. Or you can think shorter and the breath will go shorter, deeper, more shallow. Try to get a sense of cause and effect. In other words, notice how you’re focusing on the breath and then notice what the sensation is like. And if you find that it’s uncomfortable, you can change it. This is probably the most basic principle in the practice. It’s this ability to watch for cause and effect and then learn how to adjust the causes so they’re just right. It requires patience and awareness. It requires good powers of observation. But the results are always worthwhile. In other words, you learn from doing. As the Buddha said, our awareness of the present moment isn’t just a given. We’re participating in the present moment all the time. We’re making choices. We’re focusing our attention here, choosing to focus our attention over there. And so we want to become more and more sensitive to exactly what it is we’re doing in the present moment. All too often we think of ourselves just simply as hapless victims of whatever happens to come our way. But that’s not the case. We’re also shaping our experience all the time. And so you want to become more and more sensitive to how you’re shaping it so you can learn how to shape it in more skillful ways. This goes back to one of the Buddha’s most famous teachings, his Discourse to the Kalamas, a group of people who had heard lots of different teachers talking about lots of different theories and attacking each other. And as he said to the Buddha, “It’s hard for us to tell who’s right and who’s wrong.” And so the Buddha responded. He said, “Well, don’t just go by scripture and don’t just go by respect for your teacher. Don’t just go by reports handed down.” That’s the part of the teacher we’re most familiar with. But he also said, “Don’t go by your own preferences or just by reasoning things out on your own.” In other words, just because somebody outside says something is true doesn’t mean it’s true. And also, just because you have a feeling inside that something is true, that doesn’t mean it’s true either. You see, you have to watch. If you put a certain teaching into practice, see what the results are. If it leads to greed, anger, and delusion, if it leads to suffering for yourself or other people, then you know what’s wrong. If it leads to no greed, no anger, no delusion, no suffering, no harm for anybody, then it’s a true teaching. Also, if you notice, something is criticized by the wise. That’s a rational red light right there. In other words, you can’t just go by your own sense of right and wrong or even your own sense of cause and effect, because that has to be trained. You compare it with other people you consider to be wise. This is a real balancing act. One, learning how to recognize wise people, and two, learning when to take their advice and when you have to go on your own. In other words, there are no easy answers. But if you develop your powers of observation, if you have this ability to be your own governor, be in charge of yourself, this means being really clear on what you’re doing, really clear on what the results are, and being truthful enough to admit mistakes. The Buddha once said, “Give me someone who is truthful and no deceiver, and I will teach that person the Dhamma.” That’s the basic prerequisite for any practice of the Dhamma, is that you’re truthful with yourself. When you notice you’ve done something that’s led to harm, you admit the fact to yourself. You don’t try to hide it. You don’t deny it. You don’t go into repression. If you make up your mind, you’re going to learn from your mistake. This is why Buddhism places such an emphasis on being a sort of person who is willing to take criticism. In other words, you learn not only from yourself but also from other people. Remembering the criticism, whatever the intention is, if it really points out something that you’re doing wrong, you’ve learned something valuable. As they say, regard that person as someone who points out treasure to you, the person who points out your faults. So it’s balancing a lot of different factors. But what it comes down to is just being very careful about what you do. Paying careful attention to what you do and then noticing the results and learning from it. This is a lot of the meditation, a lot of the whole practice as a whole, right there. It starts with what you do and what you say and goes on into what you think, and even more subtle things. What your perception of the situation is, how that affects what actually goes on. How you focus on things that are important to you, what things you pay attention to, what things you ignore. All of these things are choices that you make, and they shape reality. The major question comes down to, “Are they shaping it in a skillful way or an unskillful way?” It’s the sensitivity to cause and effect that’s the only thing that gives you any guidance. So always be aware that no matter what you do, if the question is evening about the right effort, some kinds of effort are more subtle than others. But they still are effort. We’re always doing something in the present moment. If it weren’t for our doing in the present moment, we wouldn’t be aware of the present moment. So be aware of the fact that you’re always doing something right now. Just try to be sensitive to what it is. And then play with it. Experiment to see if you can relate to the present moment in more and more subtle ways. The breath is an excellent place to experiment, because it responds immediately to what’s going on in the mind. Of all the parts of the body, all the aspects of having a body, the breath is the closest to the mind, the most sensitive to what’s happening in the mind. Many times, the slightest change in the mind. Anger comes in, your breath changes. Greed comes in, your breath changes. Fear comes, your breath changes immediately. When mindfulness comes, when alertness comes, these things change the breath as well. Even when these things arise only in very subtle ways in the mind, the breath will be affected. So if you learn how to make this your point of observation, you’re learning not only about the body and the breath, but you also have a good vantage point for getting to know your own mind and see the subtle movements of the mind that you otherwise wouldn’t detect. Remember that the Buddha’s basic insight on the night of his awakening was into the principle of cause and effect. And he made use of that principle to lead to awakening. In other words, total freedom from stress and suffering. He liberated his heart by seeing exactly what he was doing in the present moment, realizing that through our actions—and actions here means our intentions and our choices—we’re shaping the present and the future. So you watch that process very carefully. Learn from it. Learn how to master it. And that’s what can take you to awakening as well.

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