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When you meditate while listening to a Dharma talk, don’t listen to the talk. Focus on the meditation as much as you can. Give it ninety-nine percent of your attention. Leave only a sliver of attention for the talk, because the whole purpose of the talk here is not to distract you from the meditation, but actually to help act as a fence so that the mind leaves a breath. It runs into the talk, so it turns back to the breath. If there’s anything that’s relevant to what you’re doing in the meditation right now, it’ll come right in and echo through your mind without you having to try to pay attention to it. And if it’s not relevant to what you’re doing, you don’t want it anyhow. Say, “Well, that piece of Dharma or that point of Dharma is for somebody else. And if it’s not right for anybody here in the room, well, it’s probably for the speaker.” So leave the talk alone, and focus as much as you can on the breath coming in and going out. And put out of your mind all thoughts about how your last meditation went, or yesterday’s meditation went, or how it was last week. Just focus on what you’ve got right here, right now. This is an important element in the practice. If you keep concerns about how good things have been or how bad things have been, it gets in the way of the present moment. Just like anticipations about how you hope tonight’s meditation is going to be like this or be like that. That gets in the way of what you’re supposed to be doing right now. The meditation is a doing. All too often we’re looking for experiences. We want to experience this sense of ease, this sense of bliss. But the Buddha’s focus in the practice is on being skillful in doing, keeping mindful, keeping alert, being ardent in the practice, finding a sense of just right. When they talk about the Middle Way, it’s an amount of effort that’s just right for where you are right now. Sometimes it may require a lot of effort. Sometimes it means just a little bit of effort. But whatever kind of effort is required, that’s what you supply. In other words, that’s the kind of mental attitude you want to have, that you’re up for whatever is there. Then you have a sense of how much can be done right now, too. Sometimes you realize, okay, just a bare amount of concentration or a bare amount of mindfulness is all you can manage. Okay, we’ll stick with that. Don’t throw it away because it’s not up to your standards. As Ajahn Lee says, “Big things come from little things.” Sometimes very tiny victories are the ones that add up. You were able to stay with this breath, and then you stayed with the next breath, and then the next breath. Even though it may not have felt all that secure, it’s better than just getting upset and saying, “Gee, this isn’t amounting to anything. This is horrible,” and all the spinning out of control that happens based on that. You take things one step at a time, whatever the step is required. If it requires you to step up high, okay, you step up high. If it’s just simply a step along even, smooth ground, okay, you can step along even, smooth ground. But you take whatever step is needed. And whether it matches where you would like to be right now or doesn’t match where you’d like to be right now, that’s not the issue. The issue is that you’re here. You’re doing what’s required. You’re doing the best that can be done in the situation. And as you stay with these little tiny steps, okay, then they begin to take on more depth, more strength, more solidity. If you measure them against your ideas of how you’d like things to be, you tend to throw them away. And if things keep getting thrown away, what do you have? Concentration starts out in little tiny bits and pieces. And it’s learning how to stay with those little bits and pieces. That’s all you have to do is just stay with them. They may not be impressive. They may not have lots of flashing lights or whatever you’d like or whatever you have experienced in the past. But they’re the beginning. They’re the seeds. So you stay with them. You nourish them. And they grow. That’s the sign of a discerning person. You make the most of what you’ve got. And it may be a lot, and it may be a little. And it may change from day to day. So you’re alert to that, sensitive to that. And you accept whatever difficulties there may be in the situation and do the best that you can. So take whatever little concentration you may have. And if it seems like a little, don’t berate it. Just work with it. Whatever sensitivities you can get out of the breathing, just stick with that. Even if it doesn’t seem the most wonderful breath you’ve ever had. Well, okay, work with what you’ve got. Because these things do develop. You give them time, they develop. You’ve got a fruit on the tree. Even though it’s a little tiny fruit, you just keep at it. You keep watering the roots, fertilizing the soil, looking after the causes. And the results will take care of themselves. Try to keep your reference right here. In other words, don’t think about the past and don’t anticipate the future. And what you’ve got will have a chance to grow. It’s a very simple principle, but we tend to forget it. But it’s by keeping things simple that the meditation works. Look at the questions the Buddha has us ask. Very simple questions. Where is there stress right now? And before you hit the stress, okay, where can the mind settle down? Because if the mind hasn’t settled down, it has at least some sense of ease, like when it can’t see anything clearly. So sometimes where it can settle down is just an ordinary feeling of okayness, some place in the body. But you stick with that. And then as things begin to grow, okay, then they get more solid. Still though, you stick with the simple questions. Where is there stress here? And that’s a question that a seven-year-old can answer. At least a seven-year-old can get his mind around it, or her mind around it, and then work with that. There are stories of arahants who are seven years old in the time of the Buddha. That’s as far down as it goes, seven years. So they weren’t dealing with any very abstruse philosophical issues. They were just looking very clearly at what was going on in their minds. And the questions were simple enough to comprehend. And they were happy to stick with those simple questions. Where is there stress? What are you doing that’s unnecessary that contributes to that stress? Well, then you just drop it. And it’s just that your powers have of perception get more and more precise, more and more subtle. The question stays the same all the way down. So if we keep things simple, the meditation becomes a lot more manageable. And it’s this simple sort of question that helps sort of see through the mind’s subterfuges. So they tend to get more and more abstract and to like to deal in really fancy-sounding pots. And it’s that simple thing. It’s like the emperor’s new clothes. The person who is willing to say, “I don’t understand this. This doesn’t make any sense.” That usually rips right through a lot of subterfuges. A lot of denial. The things we think we understand, the things we think we know, or at least give the impression that we know. You have to learn how to look behind those. And it’s that simple question, “Well, is that really so? What does that really mean? Is that a really helpful way to think?” Just keep asking these very simple, direct questions. It helps clear up a lot of confusion in the mind.

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