The Mind Well Trained

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One of the first things you discover when you try to focus your attention on the breath is that it won’t stay there. You suddenly think about this, think about that, and find yourself wandering all over the place. And it’s a normal thing to happen. The important thing is that you’re not giving in. In other words, as soon as you realize you’ve wandered off, you bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Just don’t give in. It requires effort. But the effort here is in something that’s comfortable. In other words, try to focus on the breath in a way that it feels good. Be friends with the breath. Oftentimes, if you find that you can’t stay with the breath, it suddenly seems like an enemy, the last place you want to be. But you realize that the breath is what keeps the mind and the body together. And it only stands to reason that if the breathing is comfortable, feels good physically, is easy to follow mentally, then it’s going to be good both for the body and for the mind. So try to be on friendly terms with the breath. What this means is that in training the mind, which is what we’re doing here, you have to try to apply both the carrot and the stick. The carrot here is the sense of ease that comes when you can focus on the breath continually. Because this is what the mind wants more than anything else, a place where it can stay and not have to keep jumping around. So you learn to work through any discomfort in the breath. If it’s too short, you can make it longer. If it’s too long, you make it a little shorter. You can experiment to see whether deep breathing feels best or shallow breathing feels better. Fast, slow, heavy light. Lots of ways of experimenting with the texture and the rhythm of the breathing. And after a while you find that it’s not that difficult to stay with the breath. You begin to sense that it really does make a difference in how you feel physically. And the mind, at the same time, gets a chance to relax some of its tension. It doesn’t have to keep tensed up, ready to jump off at the least stimulus. You can stay continuous from one breath to the next to the next. And it feels good. That’s the carrot. The stick is having to remind yourself that you’ve got to keep coming back to the breath. You can’t allow the mind to wander off and think about whatever comes to it. Oftentimes the mind feels, “Oh, I’ve got this whole hour here. Let me think about this for a while. Let me think about that for a while.” If you do that, nothing much gets accomplished, especially nothing much in terms of training the mind. So you’ve got to remind yourself that if the mind is not under your control, you’re really in bad shape. This is the most important possession you’ve got. The most important force in your life is your mind. If you can’t control it, then your life is out of control. Moods take over. Emotions take over. Weird thoughts, you don’t know where they come from. Sometimes they take over. They can get you to do and say and think things that are really not in your best interest. And if it’s just difficult to keep the mind under control now while you’re sitting here perfectly healthy, what’s it going to be like as you get older, when you get sick, as you approach death? These are the things we have to think about. Because as the chant we had just now says, “These things are unavoidable,” the Thai translation says, “These things aren’t normal. We haven’t escaped them.” So as long as we’re here with a body that’s subject to aging, illness, and death, we’ve got to find another place to build our happiness. All too often our happiness is built on providing for the body, making sure it has good food, a nice place to sleep, pleasures, good things to look at, good things to listen to. But when the body starts going and all the senses start going, what’s the mind going to do then if it doesn’t have a refuge that it’s built for itself? These things provide the carrot. As the mind wanders off, they say, “Okay, you wander off now. How many more times are you going to wander off before you begin to realize that it doesn’t take you anywhere you really want to go? Just go chewing over the same old thoughts that you’ve had before. And what does it accomplish? Nothing really much. The basic principle in the Buddhist teachings is that the mind well-trained brings happiness. In other words, happiness isn’t just going to come floating your way. In truth, happiness doesn’t come in indulging your pleasures or indulging your impulses to think about this or focus on that. It comes from bringing the mind under your control. You want to keep it focused on the breath, it stays on the breath. You discover that very slight sense of pleasure that comes as the breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. Well, if you keep allowing the mind to stay there and sort of tune in to that level of pleasure, it just gets stronger and stronger and stronger until you have the feeling that all you really need to do is just sit here and breathe, and you’ll just feel perfectly fine. Whatever worries or cares you’ve brought from daily life, they don’t seem so important anymore. That’s where you’re developing an inner refuge for yourself. It gives you something to hold on to. Everyone here has the Buddhist teachings to let go, let go. Well, before you can let go, you’ve got to learn how to hang on skillfully. In other words, if you’re going to give up your ordinary, everyday pleasures, you’ve got to have a deeper pleasure, a stronger, a higher pleasure that gives more satisfaction. Otherwise, you can’t really let go, because the nature of the mind is to hold on. So until it’s mature enough so that it can truly let go, you’ve got to just give it better and better things to hold on to. So allow it to hold on to the breath, hold on to this state of stillness and ease that comes with staying with the breath, when you balance things just right. Basically, what we’re doing here is working on a skill. And what does a skill need? One, it needs feedback. In other words, you focus on the breath for a while, then you notice,”Well, how are things going? Does the breath feel good? If not, change it.” So you’re not only getting feedback. A lot of physical processes get feedback. It’s a mental process. You’re able to monitor the feedback. “Okay, this is the way things are going. Is this where you want it to go? Well, no. Try changing it.” Use your ingenuity. You can start out focusing on the tip of the nose, but if you find that that’s not a comfortable place to stay, you can focus your attention on anywhere in the body that’s easy to follow—the sensation of breathing. So you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. So learn how to monitor what’s going on and how the mind relates to the breath. This will take time as you get a sense of what’s really comfortable and what has the potential of becoming more comfortable, what has the potential of making things worse. It’s like a scientist experimenting with something. Try this. Try that. Use your ingenuity to see if you can make the breath and the mind more and more snug with each other. See exactly what mental processes you need in order to keep the mind with the breath. On the one hand, there’s mindfulness, which means keeping the breath in mind. Then there’s alertness, which means watching how the breath feels. Watching over the mind to make sure it stays with the breath, and then noticing what happens as a result of your actions. It’s a reflective kind of process. Stay with the breath for a while and say, “Well, how does it feel now?” If it doesn’t quite feel the way you’d like, okay, change it a little bit. See if that improves it. If it doesn’t, we’ll go back. So you’ve got mindfulness, alertness, and then there’s the quality of persistence. Just stick with it. I sit and meditate for a little while and say, “Well, this seems to be getting nowhere. Maybe I should go do something else.” That’s not going to get you anywhere in training the mind, and the mind will still be in the same shape it was before. Try this. Try that. Just stick with the process. Many people have walked this path before, and they all guarantee that it gives good results. So give it a serious try. Give it the effort that it deserves. When you find that it leads the mind into deeper and deeper and deeper stages of concentration, deeper stages of stillness, in the process of going through those stages of stillness, you begin to learn a lot of lessons about the mind. Things that were hidden from you before suddenly become clear. This is partly simply because the greater the stillness, the more things are visible. It’s like background noise in a room. There’s a lot of background noise, and you can’t hear subtle things going on, even right next to you. But if you can get rid of this noise, get rid of that noise, so that things settle down, all of a sudden you can hear your heartbeat in your ears. You can hear very subtle things that are happening around you, because the level of ambient noise is going down. This is what you’re trying to do. Allow the breath to grow more and more still. Allow the mind to just settle down and let go of its worries and concerns. So this background noise inside begins to settle down, calm down. And then you notice the movements of the mind a lot more clearly, when it labels something, when it thinks about something, when it focuses on something, when it asks a question. You begin to see these activities as they get more and more subtle. And you also begin to see the results, the effects that they have, in terms of leading to well-being or away from well-being. Some of them feel very burdensome. Well, watch that for a while. See exactly where the sense of burdensomeness comes from. What are you doing to create that sense, to maintain that sense? Can you sketch yourself at the very beginning? Can you just let it go at that point? The trick in letting go is not so much that you abolish it, but that you just sort of let it fall out of your grasp. And see what happens. So much of the meditation is experimental. The Buddha gives you some basic instructions. If you notice that there’s stress or suffering someplace, if there’s harm going on someplace, just let it go. Whatever else you’re doing to cause that, let that go. This is a principle that starts from the very beginning. If a certain way of breathing is uncomfortable, change it. And it goes through greater and greater levels of subtlety. And you can start to see the mind’s impulses, its habits, the way it jumps at this, the way it thinks that, the way it obsesses about this, that, the other thing. And you begin to realize you don’t have to do that. You have the choice to say no. You have the choice to let go. We’ll check and see what happens when you exercise that choice. So many things happen in the mind. We make so many choices, unconsciously or subconsciously, without realizing what we’re doing. As the mind settles down, you begin to see some of the choices that you’ve been making that you weren’t really 100 percent clear about. Now they come more and more to the surface. And you find you can make wiser choices because you’re more alert. You’re developing these qualities of mindfulness and alertness so they really do allow you to see things that you never saw before inside. And you begin to realize how these choices really do shape your life more than anything else in the world. And you now have the freedom to shape things in a better direction. This is where the Buddha said that the well-trained mind brings happiness, brings well-being. The whole issue of control in the mind is not so much one of forcing. It’s just allowing yourself to see what’s going on more and more clearly, to realize where your choices are and how many choices you do have. Even though events outside may be beyond our control in a lot of ways, there are a lot of events inside the mind that we can learn how to control simply when we wake up to the fact that we’ve got these choices. And if we’ve been making them in an unskillful way, we can change and make them more skillful and more powerful. It’s basically as simple as that. The main issue is persistence. Just stick with it. Don’t allow any obstacles to set you back or to deflect you. Because this is the most important skill that you can develop in life. This will take you not only through aging, illness, and death, but also through self-development. It’ll help you find someone that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. And there’s really no other skill in the world that can do that.

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