Where Everything Comes Together

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Try to let go of all the uncertainties in your mind and focus on something that’s certain. The breath is coming in, the breath is going out. Take this as your foundation. When you develop this awareness of the present moment that’s firmly set, send it in the breath like this. You begin to develop a foundation for knowing other things as well. You know the movements of your mind. You begin to see which ones are skillful and which ones are unskillful, because you’re right here to watch. You’re not off dealing in abstractions. This is where true knowledge starts. That’s your awareness of the present moment. The breath is a good place to start, because it’s right where the mind and the body meet. We tend to think of our primary awareness being of the body as a solid thing and the breath coming in and going out. But it’s actually the breath energy in the body that’s the most immediate thing we’re aware of. From that, we have our awareness of the solidity, or the liquidity, or the warmth, or whatever, of the body. It’s a start right here where it’s really basic. When we move away from this point, we move into a lot of uncertainties, what the Buddha called ignorance, avicca. Avicca is not knowing things outside. It’s basically not knowing our own minds. We’re so caught up in knowing things outside, having ideas about things outside, speculating about things outside, whatever, that we’re ignorant of what we really should be aware of, which is our own awareness right here, right now. In particular, our own awareness of what we’re doing and what the results are of what we’re doing. When we’re out of touch with this, we’re really out of touch with everything. Cause and effect become very unclear. But when you see the causes that are coming out of your own mind, and the effects that come as a result, then your awareness, then your knowledge, is building on a solid foundation. The Buddha started out restricting his awareness just to this very narrow area. He focused simply on the breath coming in and going out on the night leading up to his awakening. Then he was able to build up his knowledge of the Dhamma based on this. If we’re going to understand the Dhamma, we want to put the Dhamma to the best use. This is where we have to come back to. This spot right here, this awareness right here. Make it as continuous as possible, as observant and as refined as possible. The more refined, the more sensitive this awareness is, the more it’s going to pick up in terms of the movements of the mind, the results that come about. Those movements of the mind, the important ones, are the places where we make choices. Where we intend to do this, intend to do that, intend to speak this, intend to think that, intend to look here, again, to notice that. Those are the movements that really shape things. In fact, we don’t realize how much they do shape things. Our entire awareness of space and time is based on intentional actions. But the intentions are buried so deep and they’re so subtle that we don’t usually notice them. We’re running off noticing other things. So now the time is to back up, back up, back up to these really basic level of decisions that we’re making all the time. To see them, we have to make the mind really still. This is why strong concentration is so important. It’s such an important part of the practice. Get the mind centered very firmly right here and then maintain that. Because it’s only through continuous watching that you’re really going to know anything. When you look at the Buddha’s basic teachings, the basic instructions were, “Okay, focus your attention here. Look at things in terms of—start out with the questions of skillful and unskillful. What are you doing that’s skillful? What are you doing that’s unskillful?” That evolves gradually into an understanding of the four noble truths. Unskillful actions are based on craving. Skillful ones are based on the path. The results in the first instance are suffering. The results in the second are cessation of suffering. So having this ability to ask the questions about skillful, unskillful, cause and effect, that takes you to the basic understanding that leads to awakening. So you focus here. You develop the right qualities of mind in terms of persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. Learn to ask the right questions, and things open up. That’s the essence of the teachings. It’s the essence of the practice. The real work comes in developing those qualities of the mind. Sticking with the practice, keep coming back, coming back, coming back. Because you’ll find in the beginning your concentration comes in phrases, like music. There’s a stretch where you’re settled on the breath, and then there’s a moment where you’re off, and then there’s another stretch where you’re settled on the breath, and then you’re off. So on one hand you’re trying to make those phrases longer and longer until you begin to notice where the mind sort of stops to take a breath, basically moves off the breath, where there’s a break in the phrasing. And you learn to plow through those breaks so that there isn’t a break anymore. It’s one long, continuous stretch of awareness. Because it’s often in those breaks in between that the really interesting things are happening in the mind. It’s like a play when they pull down the curtain in order to change the scenes. Well, if you really want to get behind the illusion of the scenery, it’s best to see it while it’s being changed. “Oh my gosh, it’s just a bunch of people running around putting up sets.” It helps to totally destroy the illusion. And that’s what we’re doing as we meditate, is destroying the illusion so the mind sets up for itself. Look behind the curtains between the acts, and you start seeing some really interesting things about choices that are made that you hide from yourself. And you can’t see them unless your concentration is really consistent. Connected. So at the beginnings and ends of these cause and effect patterns are really right there for you to see. The work, as I said, comes in making the concentration strong, solid, stable. Unflinching, unwavering. Any thought that comes up in the mind, you don’t have to tend to it right now. Just let it go. Leave it unfinished. One of the biggest enemies of concentration is feeling that once a thought comes up, you’ve got to sort of tidy it up, finish it off, make it a good thought before you let it go. Actually, what you do is whenever anything like that comes up, just don’t pay any attention to it. Leave it half-finished. Leave it half-baked. Then you’ll find it easier and easier to wean yourself away from that kind of thinking. The only thoughts you should listen to right now are the ones that keep reminding you to stay here, stay here. Look at this. Notice that. When you find yourself doing this, you begin to gain a much greater understanding of what you’re doing. When you see what you’re doing, you begin to understand what other people are all about, too. The awareness spreads from this one spot and begins to connect in ways that you wouldn’t expect. So don’t be afraid, as you’re focusing on this one point or trying to maintain this center, that you’re going to miss out on things. All the important things come gathering right here. After all, the Buddha said the essence of discernment is understanding formations or fabrications, sankharas. And what are they? The ones we have to understand are kaya-sankhara, bodily fabrication. That’s the breath. Vajji-sankhara, verbal fabrication. That’s directed thought and evaluation. Those are two factors of jhana. And mental sankharas, citta-sankhara, feelings and perceptions. There’s the feeling of comfort or discomfort that comes with the breath. And your perception, in-breath, out-breath, cause and effect. These things are all right here when you’ve got the mind centered on the breath. So you’re at the spot where everything comes together, where everything can be sorted out. Once it’s sorted out right here, everything is taken care of. So don’t feel that you’re being limited or that you’re cutting yourself off from interesting or important things. The really crucial things in your life are happening right here. And so you want to be here as much as possible to see what they are and shape them in the direction you really want to go.

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