Jewels in the Mind

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The Buddha once said that people who live without an object of respect live in misery. Even he himself said he had to have something that he respected. And he gave his respect to the Dharma, what he had discovered in his practice. We tend to think of the Dharma as words, as ideas. As objects of the mind. But for him, the Dharma also meant qualities of the mind. So it’s certain qualities of our minds that we have to look at. See what kind of qualities we respect, what kind of qualities we hold higher than our own ideas, our own preconceived notions. The Buddha advised starting out with qualities of mindfulness and alertness. This is why we practice some of the meditation. In other words, we think of the breath, try to keep that thought in mind. That’s mindfulness. Then you watch the breath, see what’s actually going on. Is it coming in? Is it going out? How does it feel? You might want to start out with a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths to see how that feels. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels good for the body, feels satisfying, coming in, satisfying, going out. You can experiment as much as you like. And just watch, and watch carefully. There’s a third quality that he recommends, and that’s called “ardency,” when you really focus on what you’re doing. It’s like when you listen to music, when you want to listen very carefully, and not just go through the motions. It’s this quality of taking care, that’s what makes all the difference. In other words, you try not to be sloppy. You try to really notice what’s going on. Be sensitive to whatever, the slightest bit of tension or tightness you might feel in different parts of the body as you breathe in and out. You may notice that as you breathe in, certain parts of the body get tense and tight. Well, just allow yourself to breathe in without their getting tense and tight. One way to check for this is just go through the body section by section. Compare how the right side of the body feels compared to the left side. Then if one side feels more tense than the other, relax it. Because breathing is a whole body process. Your entire nervous system is involved in the energy that brings the air into the nose and down to the lungs. The air itself is not the breath. It’s that flow of energy that pulls the air in. That’s the breath we’re focusing on. When you start out, you want to focus on one spot that’s easy to follow. Because if you try to follow too many things all at once, it gets you distracted. It can be at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, any spot where you find it easy to stay focused. At the same time, you know, “Okay, now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” It’s not that you don’t sense other parts of the body. It’s just that you don’t give them any emphasis, any weight. One of the meanings for the word “respect” in Pali is related to this giving weight to something. It doesn’t mean that you make it heavy. It’s just that you give it emphasis. You give it importance. No matter what else is going on, you try to focus just on that. Even though you’re aware of other things, they’re not the focus. They’re not what you’re keeping track of. So you have to take care as you do this. This is not an exercise in sloppiness. It’s an exercise in carefulness, heedfulness, paying close attention, listening to what’s going on. In other words, whatever you do, if you notice there’s any stress or tension or tightness that results from what you’re doing, okay, that’s a sign that you need to pay more attention there to see how you can do the breathing in a way that doesn’t create that tension or tightness. It’s the quality of the mind that you’re looking for here. That ultimately becomes the most important thing. You focus on the breath, not so much to catch the breath itself, but to develop that quality of mind of focusing, listening, paying careful attention to what you’re doing. This is how any skill is developed. You not only have to be sensitive to the objects that you’re working with, but also you have to be sensitive to what you’re doing. How are your actions affecting those objects? In the beginning, your powers of observation are going to be crude. But as you keep working with the same skill over and over again, you start getting more and more sensitive to differences in what you’re doing, differences in your raw materials, differences in the results that come out. But what we’re working on here is the ability to develop that power of paying careful attention, noticing, listening deeply. You find many times that as you really do listen to things, you start seeing things that you didn’t notice were there before. They’ve been there all along. It’s just you’ve overlooked them. And there’s a strong temptation, once you get an insight like this, just to drop that quality of mind and latch on to the insight. We’ve got a great little bit of wisdom here, or a great idea, or a great insight, great information. It’s like having a jewel that gives you off rays of light. You throw away the jewel and try to grab hold of the light. You miss the point that it’s the jewel itself that you really want. As long as you have the jewel, okay, it keeps on giving off light. But when you try to grab hold of the light instead of the jewel, okay, you’ve lost both the jewels, and you realize you don’t have anything there to grab hold of. So it’s this quality of mind that’s paying careful attention. That’s what we’re working on. That’s what you want to have respect for. Because that’s the quality that will keep giving rise to insights, keep helping you see things as they’re going on, in particular seeing what you’re doing. In this case, it’s simply getting more sensitive to how the breath feels in the body and how your interaction with the breath has an effect on the breath. You can’t help it. As soon as you pay attention to the breath, it’s going to change. You want to be sensitive to how you pay attention so that it changes in a good way. Try not to grab hold too hard of the breath. Try not to be too loose in it. The traditional image is like holding a chick in your hand, a baby chick. If you grab it too hard, it dies. If you grab it too loosely, it flies away. You want to cup it in your hands. Maintain that chick right there. Just enough pressure, just enough constriction, so that it doesn’t fly away. So how do you find this? We just listen carefully, notice carefully, to what you’re doing and to the effect it has on the breath. “Doing” here sometimes means simply thinking about the breath in a certain way. Try to think about the breath in a way that the breath will feel good, coming in, going out. Again, don’t be too worried about the air coming in and out the nose, but just the feeling of energy that flows through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Learn to sensitize yourself to that. Pay careful attention to that and see the principle of cause and effect as it happens right here and now. It’s that state of mind that can see cause and effect and can catch yourself doing things that you used to do unconsciously. That’s the state of mind you want to have respect for. When they talk about having respect for concentration, being ardent in what you’re doing, this is precisely what they’re talking about. Having respect for that quality of mind. The jewel that gives off light. I’m not trying to go around with a little box that collects little rays of light that you can then tell this person, then tell that person. That’s not what you want. You want the jewel. You want to show respect for that jewel, this potential for awareness, for alertness, for being observant in areas where you weren’t observant before. That’s the quality you want to develop. Show respect for it. You try to develop it at all times, whenever you can, because it’s useful at all times. If you give precedence to it, if you give it importance, if you give it weight in your life. When you find that the breath starts feeling comfortable, you can start exploring how it feels in different parts of the body. Try three or four different spots. Start with the navel. Stay there for a while. Move up to the solar plexus. Stay there for a while. Middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head. Then choose which of those five spots felt best and maintain that as your center. Try to keep track of it for the rest of the hour. If you slip off, don’t worry. Just come right back to it. The important thing is that you be sensitive to how the breathing feels, for it’s this quality of sensitivity that’s going to lead you in the right direction.

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