Veils of Delusion, The

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We’re as familiar with the world outside us, but the world inside, for most of us, is a big mystery. It’s like those old maps from the 16th century. They’d have the coastlines in a lot of detail, but the interior was this big white space, no idea what was in there. If it were just a white space, that would be okay, but many times people had all kinds of strange ideas about what was in the interior. They used to think, for instance, that the San Francisco Bay was a river that went all the way back to the Rocky Mountains, and they spent a lot of time and a lot of energy trying to find that river. Of course, it doesn’t exist. But it shows how much we can project onto these empty spaces. It’s the same with our own minds. We project a lot of things in there that may not necessarily actually be there. What we’re doing as we meditate is actually looking inside. We’re exploring, following things in to see what actually is going on in the mind, what its real needs are. As most of us believe, our happiness depends on things outside. Being that way, that person being that way, this situation, that situation. It’s like trying to build a house on a foundation that’s placed in the sand. It’s all going to crumble away someday. That kind of happiness. So we have to learn to look inside and see, “Well, what resources do we have in here that we really can depend on?” Illness, death, separation. When these things happen, the mind isn’t going to be in a position where it comes crumbling down. We want to look for strength inside. We want to look for inner wealth, inner security. So it means we have to look very carefully in the present moment. This is why we focus first on the breath, because the breath is the anchor that keeps us right here. It also helps pull us out of our heads. So much of our lives is spent up in the gray matter, thinking about this, imagining that, and these worlds that we create in our mind take over. It’s almost as if every little sensation in our body is coded to turn into a vision of one kind or another, an image of one kind or another. So what we’re doing is uncoding it, just getting back to the pure physicality of what it means, what it feels like to be in a body. When you breathe in, what’s actually happening? We have all kinds of preconceived notions about what the breath is doing. Let’s stop to take stock of, okay, what do you really feel as you breathe in? What do you feel as you breathe out? When you breathe in, how far does the sensation of the breathing go? What gets changed with the in-breath? What changes happen with the out-breath? Try to relax the whole body so that you can be sensitive to this. If there’s a lot of tightness, say, in your arms or in your legs, it prevents these sensations from being very clear. So just go through the body and just kind of say, “Relax, relax, relax, relax,” all the way down. Then notice what’s left, what impact the breath has as it comes in, as it goes out. Is it comfortable? If it’s not, you can change it. Try varying the breath so that you’ll find a rhythm and a texture of breathing that feels good as you breathe in, feels good as you breathe out, something that makes it more and more interesting, more and more attractive to stay in the present moment. Think of the breath going all the way down to the toes as you breathe in. Any tension or tightnesses in the body, think of it just dissolving away as you breathe out. Keep working at that until you feel really centered and stable down in the body. You realize that this can be your center of gravity, rather than everything up in the head, everything up in the worlds of imagination that the mind creates for itself. Keep reminding yourself of how important it is to be in the present. All the important things in life happen here in the present moment, but for the most part we’re not here. We’re off someplace else, and so we miss them. In particular, the movements of the mind, we tend to disguise them from ourselves. It’s like we place a curtain over the activities of the mind as it creates this and creates that, and then we open up the curtain, and there it all is. We forget the process that we went through to create it. So it takes on reality that it really shouldn’t have. So we see the product, but we tend to blind ourselves to the process. It’s the process that’s important. It’s this process that keeps the mind weak, keeps the mind dependent on things outside. If we learn how to see through these processes where the mind is making all these creations, we begin to see that the mind doesn’t need things outside. If it learns how to see through these things, take them apart, it comes to a more solid, deeper level inside itself that’s not dependent on outside input. It’s perfectly self-sufficient. But it depends on this ability to take these things apart. We can only do that by staying very resolutely in the present moment, not getting deflected by anything at all. This is why insight requires such strong concentration. People talk about doing insight meditation without much power of concentration, and the insights, they’ve got these little fleeting things, little bits and pieces here and there. But there’s nothing continuous. There’s nothing solid. The context is missing. And the solidity of mind, the solidity of your focus that can keep you there from cause to effect, that’s missing as well. So you can see how these things get strung together. What leads to what, and then what does that lead to, and where does it come around again? The mind has to be really steady to see this. So the time spent on learning how to train the mind to be really still, solidly here in the present moment, is not wasted time. It’s an important step. It’s the basis of our skill here. And it’s not that it gives its result only way off in the future. As the mind gets trained to stay here in the present moment, there’s a sense of solidity, of inner balance, that leads to a very immediate sense of well-being right now. Even though it may not be the ultimate, it’s still a lot better than what most people have. So try to get familiar inside. Try to be as well-versed on the workings of your mind as you are on the workings of the world outside. Begin by learning how to create this sense of stillness, this sense of solidity right now. While you’re sitting here, there’s nothing else you have to do. Just be with the breath continually. Whatever vagrant thoughts may come wandering into the mind, you don’t have to pay them any attention at all. Just let them pass. And don’t get involved in them, even to the point of trying to chase them away. They’ll go away on their own. You’ve got work to do here. Just try to keep your gaze as steady and unflinching as possible. And learn how to adjust that gaze so that it creates a sense of well-being inside the body as well. That’s all you’ve got to do right now. The reason meditation seems complicated is because we add a lot of complications to it. The process itself is quite simple, learning how to look and look continually.

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