Observing Thoughts

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As you sit here trying to keep your thoughts with the breath, you’ll find that other thoughts come up. This is natural, after all, when you’re here in the present moment. And where else are you? It’s not only the results of your present actions; they’re also the results of your past actions. It’s that past karma that keeps bubbling up. Thought about this, thought about that. You don’t have to worry about your past karma. It just does its thing. Your task is to keep a careful watch over your present karma. What decisions are you making right now? What are you focusing on? You want to focus on the breath. So whatever else comes up, you don’t have to pay it any attention. You want to get the breath as your foundation here. As for the other voices and other thoughts, you can just leave them alone. Think of them as background chatter, background noise, like the crickets. Let’s sit here for the hour on the crickets. The crickets are going to do their thing for the whole hour. And if you got upset about the crickets, your meditation would be ruined. So they do their thing. And think of these other thoughts in the same way that you think of the crickets. They come, then they go. And you don’t have to be responsible for them. You’re responsible for your present focus. So try to keep that with the breath. What you’re doing is laying a foundation. A foundation so you can give the mind a good, solid basis here in the present moment. So you can watch those thoughts when the time comes when you can stay with the breath more easily, more consistently. Then you can give a little bit more attention to that process of thinking. So you can observe what’s coming, what’s going, how it comes, how it goes. And exactly how much of that process is past karma and how much of it is present karma. And you begin to see that the fact that a thought comes and it’s clear, clearly about this, clearly about that, there’s a lot of present karma involved in that on a subtle level that you didn’t see before. But we can watch the process of thought formation. You can also begin to get a sense, “Okay, which of those other thoughts are skillful and which ones are unskillful?” How do you see that? You can see where they’re coming from, where they’re going. The Buddha made this point in one of his discourses that he got on the right path by noticing that he could divide his thoughts into two types. Instead of getting involved in them, he could just say, “Okay, these are thoughts on the unskillful side. Those are thoughts on the skillful side.” He put himself in the middle and didn’t identify with them. Just watch them as processes. In the beginning, it’s just watching the coming and going. As you get more familiar with their comings and goings, you begin to see their patterns. And it’s seeing that pattern of cause and effect. That’s where insight arises. Just watching things coming and going, that’s not really full insight. You have to see the connections to see exactly what kind of thinking causes stress and suffering, what kind of thinking leads you out of stress and suffering. This is how the Buddha treated all kinds of thoughts in the mind. There’s a passage where one of his students, Anathapindika, went to see some, what would you say, wanderers from other sects. They had all kinds of theories. “The world is eternal. The world is non-eternal. The world is finite. The world is infinite.” So they all tried to teach their views to Anathapindika. Then they asked him, “Okay, what about your teacher? What about the Buddha? What are his views?” Anathapindika said something very interesting. He said, “I really don’t know fully what the Buddha’s views are.” You have to remember, the Buddha didn’t disclose everything. He taught the things that were worth teaching to other people. As to what his other views might be, he didn’t say, because they weren’t important for the process of getting rid of suffering. So they said, “Well, well, well, you don’t even know what your teacher’s views are. How about the monks? What are their views?” Anathapindika said, “I don’t really know that either fully.” He said, “Well, what do you know?” “Well, I know what my views are.” Any view that you cling to. It leads to suffering. They said, “Well, then that would apply to your view as well. You cling to this view.” He said, “I’ll use it as a tool.” By using this view as a tool, it helps you pry your attachment to views away. So ultimately it leads you to the end of suffering. And as we say nowadays, that shut them up. In other words, you realize that there are some views, some thoughts, that really are useful as tools. Like when we’re meditating right now to stay with the breath, the thoughts that direct you towards the breath, those are important views. The values you have that remind you why it’s important to stay with the breath, those are useful views. They’re tools. You hold on to them. You don’t let them go. The ones that encourage you, saying, “What you do here in the present moment really does make a difference. Your understanding of the present moment really does make a difference. It’s worthwhile.” Those are useful tools. As long as you haven’t reached the end of the path, hold on to them. When the time comes, you’ve reached the end of the path, then you can let them go. They’re easy views to let go, because they’ve prepared you so that you can let go of anything. There’s that famous saying, “Assembly of the Raft.” Everybody focuses on the end point where the Buddha says, “Okay, once you’ve crossed over the river, you don’t need to carry the raft around.” We all know that part. The part that people forget to notice is, “Okay, while you’re in the river, you hold on to the raft.” There are certain views that are worth holding on to, because they take you someplace. They take you where you want to go. And it’s your insight into this process, which thoughts take you where you want to go, which thoughts don’t. That’s what insight is all about. There’s a causal process going on in the mind. The Buddha wants us to focus on that, because in focusing on it, we learn to master it. The mind becomes a tool. The mind becomes useful. The thoughts we have become helpful rather than a hindrance. So they take you to the part where you go beyond cause and effect. That’s when things really open up in the mind. It’s the point where there are no more intentions. But to get there requires skill, and skill requires an understanding of cause and effect. An understanding of cause and effect requires that you really be observant. To be observant, the mind has to be still. So it all comes back to where you are right now, this process of trying to get the mind still with the breath, and once it’s there, keeping it there and allowing that sense of stillness, that sense of well-being to grow. These are all very important skills. So make sure that the foundation is solid. One of the John Fung students went to him one time and complained that she’d been meditating under his guidance for many years, and meditation didn’t seem to be going anywhere. I mean, she was meditating well. She was getting the mind still, but she said, “It’s still mistaking me.” He said, “Don’t worry about it. You’re building a foundation, and you want to make sure that that foundation is strong and solid. If it’s not strong, then as you start trying to build things on top of it, everything collapses. Once it’s really in place,” he said, “you can build as many stories as you like, and they’ll stand firm.”

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