Tranquility & Insight Go Together

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Pay careful attention to the breath. Notice what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing doesn’t feel good. Maybe the length is either too long or too short, you’re holding on to it too much, or you’re cutting it short too fast. It might be the texture, it might be so refined that you can’t follow it, or so coarse that it’s unpleasant. It could be the range, just which parts of the body seem to have breath energy or be involved in the breathing, which parts aren’t. And make adjustments. This is an important part of the practice. We don’t just put up with whatever kind of breathing is happening. We actually get involved in noticing, experimenting, and then noticing again. It’s this way that we learn. We learn a lot of things. We learn the principle of cause and effect. After all, that’s the principle the Buddha gained awakening to. He said, “When there’s this, then there’s that. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.” It’s an insight into relationships between events. That’s what we’re looking for. You can’t understand relationships like this unless you get involved. If you just simply watch, watch, watch, you really have no idea what’s a causal factor for what. Things come together. Well, do they always come together, or do they just happen to come together? If you don’t experiment, you don’t learn. As we meditate, the breath becomes our laboratory. You try to make the mind as still with the breath as possible. In the same way that when you set up an experiment, you want to make sure the table on which the equipment is placed is stable and sound. It’s not rocking all over the place. If the table is unstable, then the results of the experiment are useless. That’s the same with your awareness. Your awareness is bouncing around all over the place. You really can’t see anything clearly because you don’t know which of the things you see bouncing around, or because the mind itself is bouncing around, or whether those things are actually bouncing around on their own. Try to keep the mind as still as possible with the breath and watch. Experiment a little bit and then watch again. The watching ear has to be patient. You don’t just pass judgment immediately and then fiddle around. You’ve got to watch carefully over long periods of time to get a sense of what works over the long run and what doesn’t work over the long run. The results are two. One, the mind begins to settle down, get more and more still, and have a sense of well-being. After all, you adjust the breath until it feels good, and then you can stay with it longer and longer periods of time. The mind feels more inclined to stay. It wants to stay. It feels like it’s a good place to be. It’s only when things are stable in the mind like this that you have any real sense of well-being. John Lee compares it to sitting on a chair. He says if one of the legs is uneven, you can’t really sit and relax on the chair. There’s always a feeling of tension, a feeling of dis-ease. The chair could tip over at any time. It could wobble at any time. So you can’t totally relax. It’s only when the chair is balanced and sound, all four legs are equal. All four legs are strong. Then you can relax in the chair and not worry about tipping over. It’s the same with your meditation. You want to make sure that the qualities of your meditation are sound and solid. Only then can you have any sense of ease. So what are the four legs? Well, you can think of them maybe as the four bases of success. There’s got to be the desire to do the meditation. And again, that has to be balanced. It can’t be too long or too short. In other words, if you can’t have too much of it, you can’t have too little of it. You have to find a way of balancing it out. It’s one of the reasons that we’re using it in the past. Meditation teachers would make sure that their students had at least some manual skills. That way they’d have some background in balancing the desire for success in the skill with the realization that if you want to see things clearly, you can’t have too much desire. If the desire gets in the way, then you’ve never developed the skill. You have to learn how to balance it just right. If you’ve worked on any kind of skill like this, you just forget that sense of balance. How much desire is enough to keep you on the path without getting in the way of your progress on the path? In other words, you focus on causes, the things that will get the results. If you sit there thinking about the results you want to get, you never get there. If you want to get there too fast, you get into trouble. For example, suppose you wanted to go to Los Angeles. You can sit here and think about how much you want to go to Los Angeles, but if you don’t get in the car and drive off, you never get there. On the other hand, if all you can think about is you want to get there, you want to get there, you drive too fast, you drive off the road. So you pay careful attention to the road. You drive carefully. Whatever is needed to get there, you do that. And you find that that’s what gets you there. So you need just the amount of desire to keep you on the road, and you have to rein it in so that you don’t drive too fast. That’s one of the bases. The next one is persistence, which is not just effort. Effort can be that you throw yourself into it for a while until you wear yourself out, and then you don’t have any strength to do it. That’s not the kind of effort we’re talking about. It’s more persistent, moment by moment by moment, the kind of effort you can maintain consistently over time. Without that, the meditation becomes something you do in fits and starts, and you have a little bit of understanding here, then long periods of oblivion, and then a little bit more clarity, and then more oblivion. There’s no consistency to your practice. As a result, there’s no consistency to the knowledge you gain, the big blank spaces. And the nature of the mind is it doesn’t leave the blank spaces blank. It fills them in. So you want to have a persistent effort to stick with the breath no matter what the situation is. Just enough effort to maintain your awareness of the present. As John Fuang used to say in Thay, “It’s a little thing that you do. It’s a little bit of effort, but you maintain it continually.” In Thay it’s a pun because the word for “a little bit” is nit, and the word for “continuously” is nit. But the point is that it has to be continuous for it to really make a difference in the mind. Third quality is intent. In other words, you really focus on what you’re doing. You pay careful attention. You try to be as sensitive as you can be to what’s actually going on. And the fourth quality is ingenuity. When things are not going right in the practice, what can you do to change them? When the breath isn’t comfortable, can you change the way you breathe? Can you change your concept of what it means to breathe? Because sometimes you’re dealing with a caricature of the breath. When you breathe in, you have to pull this sensation down to that part of the body, and then you push it back out. Well, does that really have to happen? Can you think of the mechanics of breathing working in another way that doesn’t require a lot of pushing and pulling and forcing and all the other activity that can make the breath uncomfortable? So you use your imagination, but it’s a use of the imagination right here in dealing with the issue at hand. It’s not just wandering off into the abstract. You work with your operative assumptions and see what assumptions make it easier to settle down. These are the four qualities that make the meditation solid. Give a sense of consistency, balance, stability to the mind so that you can see things clearly. Now, what do you want to see? You want to see cause and effect. In particular, the cause is effect. Stress is the cause of suffering. When you’re meditating, the word “stress” seems more appropriate. I’m just sitting here. Things are going pretty well. There’s no suffering, but there can be an element of stress. You want to watch for that. That’s what the Four Noble Truths are all about, figuring out what you’re doing that’s causing stress. What can you do to let it stop? This means learning to look at everything that happens in the mind and the body, not as “me” or “mine,” but simply in line with the question, “What actions here are causing stress? Which ones are the stress itself? Which experiences are the stress?” You want to get absorbed in that question, the same way that you might get absorbed in painting a picture, or absorbed in any art form, any manual skill. It’s while you’re totally involved in the skill that you learn how to forget yourself, or your sense of self gets attenuated so that when you run into that sense of self coming back again, you begin to notice it. You say, “Oh my gosh, there’s an act of eye-making that’s really blatant.” If you’ve ever mastered any skill, you know those times that when you’re really involved in it, then when you pull out and become more self-conscious, you’ll see how the self-consciousness gets in a way. The same principle applies to meditation, simply that it’s a lot more subtle. Even in any kind of art form, or the process of performing a musical instrument, the process of being in the zone in a sport, there’s still a subtle sense of eye. Just that it’s attenuated. Whereas when you’re meditating, you find that because you’re more quiet, because you’re more still, focused on this most subtle kind of stress, the even more subtle sense of creation of eye, the creation of mind, becomes really obvious. So the purpose is here to get so involved in this investigation into stress and its causes, so absorbed in this. That you start forgetting your sense of self. So that when it comes up again, you notice it. You say, “Oh my gosh, this really is a cause of stress.” That activity is causing stress, and it’s not necessary. That’s what allows you to let it go. So the work here is in getting the mind to be still. With a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of being balanced, without any fear of tipping over or losing balance. One, for the sense of well-being that it gives in the present moment, and two, for the ability to gain insight into the ways the mind, through greed or anger or delusion, causes stress. Without that kind of stability, you can’t see these things clearly. Without the focus that the vulnerable truths give you, it’s hard to get out of your sense of self long enough for you to be able to detect it when it comes back. So that’s what we’re pursuing here. The skill of being in the present moment, the skill of being stable in the present moment. As you pursue that to more and more subtle levels, you find that there’s not a very clear dividing line between tranquility and insight. The two go together. It’s when they go together that they have real power to uproot all kinds of delusion, greed, anger, and delusion, all these other unskillful habits in the mind. you

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