Scrupulous from the Start

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It’s very easy when you’re sitting for a long period of time to get complacent, thinking that you’ve got plenty of time to get the mind to settle down so there’s no great hurry. The problem is that by the time the mind has settled down, it’s been doing a lot of other things. Then you end up finding yourself that you’ve got a lot of garbage to clean up. Not just the garbage from the day, but the garbage from your casual, laissez-faire attitude towards getting it to settle down at the beginning of the meditation. You want to be as scrupulous as possible right from the very first breath. Notice how, when you switch your attention to the breath, what happens? In that first instant, does the breath change? If so, how does it change? That teaches you a lesson right there about the way the focused attention of the mind changes things. You learn a lesson in realizing that the present moment is not just a given. It’s something that you create. It’s something you fashion out of the raw materials that are there. If you’re complacent about how you fashion it, you end up with a mess. Then for the rest of the hour you have to straighten out the mess. So you want to be as clear as possible right from the very beginning. What’s happening? Get so that you know that center where the mind is focused has a place it can settle in. See how quickly you can get there. As soon as you make up your mind you’re going to focus on the breath. There you are. Learn how to land on the breath in such a way that you don’t cause a lot of pressure, a lot of shock waves. Just focus right in and then notice what’s happening. When I was first ordained, every year after the rains retreat I’d have to go and take some exams, exams I had for young monks. It involved memorizing an awful lot of Thai, with the lists in the Dharma textbook and the rules in the Vinaya textbook, and then passages of Pali which you had to memorize. They would ask you to write a little Dharma talk in which you had to quote verses from the Tripitaka, and you had to memorize them. So that you’d have a good store of verses to call on, no matter what the topic was they asked you to write on. It involved a lot of memorization. So for days I’d be sitting there stuffing this information in my mind, and I realized that there’s only so much you can stuff in, in any amount of time. You had to rest. You had to stop periodically. So I’d give myself five-minute meditation breaks every now and then. It was amazing how knowing that there were only five minutes when I’d have time to rest, how quickly the mind could settle down. Since there was so little time, you wanted to make the most of it. It’s important that you realize that you can do that quickly. Well, why not do that at the beginning of, say, an hour or two hour, three hour sit? Rather than letting the trajectory get long and gradual, and longer and more gradual the longer the sit, you want to be right there on top of the breath, right away from the very beginning. And then stay there for the next breath, and then the next, and then the next. Try to be as scrupulous as possible in your meditation. You often find that when things start getting sloppy or the meditation seems to be regressing, it’s because you’re not paying careful attention. It’s becoming mechanical. You go through the motions, and you’re not being as sensitive as you could be. Meditation is sensitivity training, an inward sensitivity to what the mind is doing and what the effects of its actions are. As the Buddha said, “With the five khandhas,” it’s not that they’re a given. We have a potential. There’s kind of a formness and a feelingness and a perceptionness and so on. And then we fabricate those potentials into actual khandhas. These are the basic building blocks. From the building blocks we create even more elaborate edifices. So our very experience of the present moment is something fabricated. There’s an element of will. If you’re casual about how you focus on the present, you’re not going to see this. It’s only when you get really scrupulous, really attentive, really sensitive to what’s going on. This is why we focus on the present moment, not because it’s a wonderful moment, but because important choices are being made moment by moment by moment right here. We want to see what they are. The whole purpose of having a meditation technique is to make us more sensitive, to point our attention in the right area, right here at the intention in the present moment. The Thai term for samadhi literally is translated as “firm intention.” You put up an intention in the mind and then try to maintain it. In the course of doing that, you learn an awful lot about the factor of intention. You intend to focus on the breath in a particular way. You intend to breathe in a particular way. All of this gives you knowledge, not only of the body, but also of the mind. The factor of intention, the factor of will, that goes into the present moment all the time. So always be sure to keep that in mind. Make sure that you’re not just going through the motions. The technique works its best when you’re being very sensitive to what’s going on, in particular being sensitive to what the mind is doing. Because when you have that sensitivity, then the technique of concentration becomes a tool for insight. The techniques of working with the breath become tools for insight. Without that factor of attention, without that factor of sensitivity, no matter what you call a particular technique—if it’s a vipassana technique or a samatha technique—there’s no insight. It’s the quality of being observant while you’re practicing. That makes all the difference. That book on swimming technique that I was reading a while back kept making the point that you have to be observant as you practice. You can practice the same stroke over and over again. If you’re not really paying attention, you’ll never learn anything. It’s when you’re paying attention of your repeated movements that you begin to see where it’s inefficient, where the improvement could be made. It’s the same with the breath. You breathe in and out how many times in the course of an hour. But if you don’t pay attention, that’s all you do. You just breathe in and out. Then maybe the mind settles down a little bit. But the insight is going to come when you start noticing where is this inefficient, where is there stress in here, how can I do this differently? Then you experiment. So try to be observant, and scrupulously observant, all the time. Every movement of the mind as you meditate. Then you find that you can make a big difference even in short periods of time. And if you’re not complacent, longer periods of time can make an even bigger difference. It all depends on how much you’re on top of the present moment each time the breath comes in, each time the breath goes out, without flagging. It’s all in the details. And the details are happening with every moment.

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