Compassionate Judgement

March, 2003

Focus your attention on the breathing. Try to be as sensitive as possible to the breath. The two things have to go together. If we just think about the breath but are not very sensitive to it, it’s hard to stay interested and it’s hard to stay with it. Try to notice in as much detail as possible how an in-breath feels, how an out-breath feels. Do you notice it only at the nose? Or other parts of the body involved as well? After all, the diaphragm has to move. The ribcage moves. Sometimes even your shoulders move. The chest moves. That much is pretty obvious. But then you notice that there are other sensations of movement in the body as well that go along with the in-breath, that go along with the out-breath. And if you really pay careful attention, you’ll notice that it’s a whole body process. Your entire nervous system is involved. So once you’ve evaluated, what do you do? Well, you can change it. If it’s not comfortable, you can change the way the breathing feels to make it more comfortable. If there’s a hitch in the breathing or a feeling of tension or tightness in any part of the body, allow it to relax. Allow it to smooth out. I guess the more comfortable the breathing is, the easier it is to stay with it. And the more that comfortable sensation comes, the more you can fill the body, the more absorbing it is. You can think of the breath going in and out the whole body all at once, or you can take it section by section. Work through the details. How does your abdomen participate in the breathing? How does the chest, how does your back, the upper part of the back, the lower part of the back, your legs, your arms, your hands? Do you tense up your hands when you breathe as part of your tension? A certain amount of tension in the hands or the feet will allow those to relax as well. And in your head, what kind of sensations do you tend to create to emphasize the fact that there’s an in-breath or an out-breath? Are they comfortable or are they not? You can play with the sensations, section by section, like this. Until you find a way of breathing that feels really gratifying. There’s a passage in the text that talks about three stages in the act of generosity. Before you’re generous, you feel happy. While you’re giving the gift, your mind feels clear and bright. And after having given it, you feel gratified. Or you want to have the same three qualities or bring the same three qualities to your meditation. To begin with, be happy that you’re doing the meditation. It’s not often that people get this chance. While you’re doing it, try to keep your mind bright and clear. Keep it observant, realizing that what you’re doing is a good thing. And then do it in such a way that you feel gratified afterwards. At the very least, have a sense of gratification with the breath. Do you know how to breathe in a way that feels good coming in, feels good going out, without gaps? It’s a continuous sensation of good breathing. This feels good for the body, and it feels good for the mind, too. It’s healing. It’s soothing. Just be careful that you don’t put yourself to sleep. This is why it’s important that once the breath starts feeling good, that you allow your awareness to spread to fill the whole body. Try to maintain that sense of whole body awareness without gaps, without it shrinking down. All of this comes under the factor of evaluation in the meditation. It’s an important factor. You’re learning to take your powers of judgment and use them wisely. Often we don’t use our powers of judgment wisely. In fact, it’s become a commonplace of modern pop psychology that being judgmental is to be uncompassionate, to be uncaring. You have to be open and accepting, not passing judgment. You have to care about someone. That’s a very shallow understanding of the powers of judgment, which largely comes from the fact that we use our powers of judgment unskillfully. Here we’re judging the breath not because we want to get rid of it or we want to separate ourselves from it, which is many times the way people judge things, but because we want to do it better, find a way to make it more gratifying, find a way that makes it easier to stay with it. This is judgment coupled with compassion, realizing that there are skillful and unskillful ways of breathing, comfortable and uncomfortable ways of breathing, and the difference matters. It’s important. Otherwise, if the breath is uncomfortable, the mind doesn’t want to stay there. It’s going to run out as soon as it gets a chance. And if it’s uncomfortable, it’s hard to bring it back. So you work with the breath, adjusting it, looking at it, observing it, evaluating it, and making more adjustments because you want it to be good. It’s this combination of using your powers of judgment and caring at the same time. They have to go together. This is why, in Thailand, the forested jhans tend to be really strict with their students, not even allowing the slightest thing to go past them, because they care. They want the students to learn. They want the students to be observant. They pass judgment because they want the students to get better, more skillful. If they’re simply accepting and allowing all the time, the students don’t grow. So use your powers of judgment to help. When these two qualities work together, they can make a real difference in the mind. As the Buddha himself pointed out, where does wisdom start? It starts with a desire for two-headedness. “What, when I do it, will be for my long-term well-being and happiness?” That’s the first question that forms the beginning of discernment, allows discernment to arise, realizing that your actions are important and that they do give results. Some actions are skillful, some are not. And who wants to go into all the effort of investing in a lot of unskillful actions? The distinction between the two is important. And you don’t want just to follow a fly-by-night happiness. You want something that’s going to last, something that sticks with you, something that doesn’t oppress anyone else. True happiness is something that’s harmful to no one. So these two wishes come together. These two qualities go together. One, the discernment that realizes that there are important distinctions in life. Differences do matter, especially when we’re talking about suffering or lack of suffering. Skillful actions can put an end to suffering, as opposed to unskillful ones that keep it going. This distinction is important, coupled with a desire for happiness. A desire for a true happiness that lasts. So the combination of the discerning mind and what you could call the discriminating mind, which has a lot of bad press but is an extremely important part of the practice, goes together with the caring mind. You care about the results of your actions. You care because you want to do it right and you want to get it right. Because if you don’t, you’re going to suffer. And if you’re suffering, you tend to cause other people to suffer as well. So this is why, as meditators, we have to be really honest in our powers of judgment. When we make a mistake, we have to admit we’ve made the mistake. Recognize it as a mistake. Be curious. We want to learn how to correct that mistake so we don’t have to do it again. All for the purpose of happiness. We start out with the breath as a testing ground, as a way of putting these two qualities together—the evaluating quality that sees distinctions and the caring quality that wants to have the results come out well. If you don’t understand the connection between the two, it’s very difficult to meditate. Once they go together, then the desire for happiness gets better and better results, because you’ve got your discriminating mind working on the side of your happiness. You’ve got your discerning mind working on the side of your happiness. The work we do here is work in well-being. You get the mind comfortable, and you don’t just rest there. You do what you can with that comfortable mind to invest it further. It’s like someone who’s invested in buying something to sell to get a profit, and then instead of just eating the profits, they take the profits and invest them again, and again, and again, so that the profits grow and grow and grow. The happiness gets bigger and deeper, more long-lasting. Because you’re not short-sighted. If you’re short-sighted, you say, “I just want to feel good right now. Don’t criticize me. Don’t do anything to make me feel bad.” That’s very short-sighted. The long-sighted approach is, “If I’m doing something wrong, I want to know.” As the Buddha said, “If someone points out something you’ve done wrong, regard that as someone who’s pointed out treasure.” A hidden treasure. Because when you correct yourself, you gain a deeper happiness, a deeper sense of well-being. You become more skillful. So remember that, ideally, these two qualities grow together, and they get split off from each other or turned into opposing qualities. It’s hard for the meditation to go anywhere. It’s hard to develop a skill. But when they go together, they can take you from the very beginning of the meditation all the way to the end.

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