Turning Inside

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This is one of those nights when you naturally want to turn your back on everything outside and focus inside. It’s raining all around. Everything is muddy. There’s nowhere to go. So you turn your attention inside. There are times when meditators are accused of turning their back on the world, and there are times when you have to do that for the health of the mind. You look around the world and see what you’ve got. The world is crazy. And if you can’t have any time of your own, why are people constantly demanding your time? What do they want out of you? You have to ask that question. Is it really selfish to look after your own mind? Is it really selfish to look at the wellspring inside, from which your entire life comes, and which affects not only you, but also the people around you? All your actions come from your intentions, and the intention is something very inner. If you’re not clearly in touch with your intentions, how are you going to know the quality of your actions? How can you be sure that the input you put into the world outside is going to be helpful? For your own sake and for the sake of the world outside, you’ve got to turn around and look inside. Give your full attention to what’s going on right here, right now, inside the mind. If you can’t focus directly on the mind, focus on the breath, because it’s the nearest physical sensation there is to the mind. Learn how to give everything in the present moment. Don’t hold anything back. Try to be totally aware. Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. The whole body is breathing in, the whole body is breathing out. To sense that, you have to bring your awareness to a heightened pitch. That requires letting go of everything else. Everything outside is in the discourse on the frames of references. They talk about putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, your whole frame of reference should be the body in and of itself. You don’t have to think about the context outside, how your body is going to function in the world. You don’t have to worry about the next hour or the next day or the next week. Just give your total attention right here, right now. Tend to what’s going on and do what you can to put it in better shape. To begin with, this means trying to make your attention as continuous as possible, because it’s only when your attention is continuous that you can see connections. We’re often told that insight means seeing things in terms of the three characteristics—that they’re inconstant, they’re stressful, and not self. But there’s a lot more to insight than just that. There has to be a context to that insight. The context is created by the teaching on karma. There’s cause and effect in your actions. There’s a quality in the cause and a quality in the effect. That’s important. At the very least, you want to have intentions that are good on the worldly level. Cause no harm to yourself, no harm to other people. On that heightened pitch, though, you want to go further. As the Buddha says, there’s a fourth kind of karma in addition to actions that are good on the worldly level, actions that are not good on the worldly level, and actions that are mixed with actions that are good on the worldly level. There’s a fourth level of karma that goes beyond all that. It’s the insight into the three characteristics that helps you in that direction. So you can judge your actions. Do they really lead to the unconditioned, or are they stopping short? If they’re stopping short, what can you do with the results that you’ve got? Because you’re creating these aggregates that you experience all the time. The potential for the aggregates comes in from the past, but what you’re doing with them right now can contain an element of intention as well. You find that you can either use them as the path, or you can use them as objects for contemplation. When a sensation comes up, it can either be a sensation that forms a basis for your concentration, or it can be a sensation that forms a basis for insight. If it’s a basis for concentration, you stick with it. If it’s insight, you analyze it in terms of those three characteristics. Use them to judge the results of what you’ve done. It’s supposed to develop a sense of dispassion for the distracting thoughts, a sense of dispassion for the things that pull you away from really looking into the mind. The whole idea that you’re either looking after your own mind or you’re helping other people, and that there’s a sharp dichotomy between the two, that’s something that seems to be more Western than Buddhist. In Buddhism, if you’re really looking after your mind, you’re helping other people as well. When you maintain your sense of balance, you’re not knocking other people out of balance. That, in and of itself, right there, is a contribution to them. As you get more sensitive to your own mind, you get more sensitive to the sufferings that other people are encountering as well. Then you realize that you wouldn’t want, intentionally, to do anything to harm anyone else. This is one of the fruits of the practice. So it’s not selfish. If there’s a little voice in your head saying, “Hold back a little bit from the meditation for this sake or for that sake, or for this person or that person, or what’s going to happen tomorrow or the next day,” don’t listen to those voices. They’re not helpful. Focus your full attention inside. We’re creating a home for the mind here. There are passages in the Theragatha. A monk is sitting in his hut. It’s raining outside, and he says, “Go ahead and rain. My roof is well-thatched. It’s not leaking, so go ahead and rain as much as you want.” That’s the kind of security we want. Of course, his verse is symbolic. The rain stands for anything that the world has to offer. When your mind is well-trained, it’s like a hut that’s very well-thatched. Nothing can get in. Nothing can penetrate. Nothing can harm that inner sense of well-being, that inner security. That’s the only place in the world where we can find true security. Everyone wants peace, peace peace, but it’s always with a condition, “Well, as long as I have total security.” But that’s impossible. On the worldly level, there is no such thing as total security. Even your body is going to turn on you. The only place true security can be found is in the mind. Once you have that inner security, it’s only then that you can really trust yourself, that your principles won’t turn to mud, to slush, when things get difficult, when the rain really starts falling. So having this secure shelter, this watertight shelter, means not only that you can trust yourself, but other people can trust you as well. So again, it’s not a selfish thing. You have to take full advantage of this hour to really give yourself to the meditation. Give it your full attention, your full powers of perseverance, your full powers of mindfulness. You don’t have to hold anything back, because everything you put into the meditation gets repaid many times over. And the dividends not only stay here in this room, but they also spread out around the people around you. There’s nothing to gain by holding back, and everything to gain by giving it your all. So always keep that in mind every time you meditate.

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