Shelter of Mental Qualities, A

May, 2003

Focus on your breath. When the breath comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. That’s really all you have to know for the next hour. The ins and outs of the breath. Of course, the mind is going to go off and think about all kinds of other things, but you don’t have to pay attention to the thoughts. Just keep bringing your thinking back to the breath. You can focus on the sensation of breathing anywhere in the body at all. Whatever sensations tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Focus on those sensations and allow them to be comfortable. All too often, when we focus on the breath like this, immediately we tense it up. It gets uncomfortable. So think, “Coming in comfortable. Going out comfortable. If your mind wanders off, bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. No matter how many times it wanders off, ten times, a hundred times, just keep bringing it back ten times, a hundred times. Don’t get discouraged here. Training the mind in new habits. Training the mind is a lot more difficult than training, say, an animal. There’s a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer is talking to the Buddha, and he says,”Within a week, I can know all the tricks that an elephant might have.” But as for human beings, sometimes it takes a whole lifetime and you still don’t know all the tricks that people have. Well, that’s what the human mind is like. It has all different ways of slipping off. But no matter what it does, as soon as you catch it, bring it back to the breath. Try to give the mind an anchor, because it spends so much of its time just wandering around like a homeless person. No shelter. No dependable food. Exposed to the cold and the rain and the heat, with no safe place of its own. So what we’re doing as we meditate is developing the qualities of mind that are needed to give the mind that safe place where it doesn’t have any other responsibilities, where it can take shelter when things go bad. And take shelter when things go well as well. You have to be careful when things go very well, because you tend to get careless and start doing things that you shouldn’t have done. So you need mindfulness and alertness to provide that shelter. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, like the breath. Just keep that thought in mind for the whole hour. We’re with the breath, with the breath. The mind thinks of other things, but no, you bring it right back. Keep remembering the breath. That’s mindfulness. Then alertness is a quality that knows what’s going on. You know when the breath is coming in, you know when it’s going out, you know if it’s comfortable, you know if it’s not. The mind wand is off, you know. You bring it back, you know. In other words, you know what’s going on right here in the present moment. Don’t go drifting off in thought bubbles to the future, thought bubbles to the past. Try to break all those little bubbles and be right here. The third quality that you’re developing is something that’s called ardency. The quality is attapa, which means that you really stick with it. Even though you want the breath to be comfortable, the mind isn’t loose and careless. You’re on top of the sensation of breathing. How does the breathing feel right now? Try to be as sensitive as you can. If it’s not comfortable, you can change it. Keep trying it. This is another aspect of ardency. Just keep working at it. Nudge it a little bit here, nudge it a little bit there. Keep at it this way. Eventually you’ll find a rhythm of breathing that feels good. So stick with it as long as it feels good. If after a while that rhythm doesn’t feel so good anymore, you can change it. Keep watch of what’s going on. When the mind does slip off, another aspect of this quality of ardency is that you bring it right back. In other words, if you catch it, you’re not thinking about tomorrow or thinking about yesterday or whatever. As soon as you realize it, you’re not supposed to be thinking about those things. You’re supposed to be with the breath. After all, that’s why you’re here. So as soon as you realize that, you come back to the breath. You don’t say to yourself, “Well, I could think about this a little bit more and then maybe eventually get back to the breath.” With that kind of attitude, nothing changes in the mind. We’re here to find skillful ways of changing the habits of the mind so it does have this inner sense of shelter. When it’s working from a sense of shelter, it’s working from a position of strength where it doesn’t harm itself. Most of the times when the mind harms itself, it’s because it’s tired and exhausted. It starts getting careless. It doesn’t want to bother with anything. It says whatever comes into the mind, does whatever comes into the mind. Without making the effort to stop and think, is that something that really is in your own best interest? So as you meditate, you’re putting the mind in a much better, much stronger place where it can judge things. Impulses come into the mind to think this, say that, do this, and you can ask yourself, “Do I really want to do that?” You can think about the results, and you realize that the results are not things that you want. You have a sense of concern. Otherwise, you don’t get careless or apathetic. You say, “Who cares what the results are? I want to do what I want right now.” That kind of attitude leads to trouble. But when the mind’s been rested, it realizes it doesn’t want to have any part in that attitude. It’s willing to look at things all the way from cause to effect. The Buddha said that’s a sign of a wise person. There are four kinds of actions that you can do in your life. The first are the things you like to do and give good results. The second are the things you don’t like to do and give bad results. Neither of these take much thought. If it’s something you like to do and it gives good results, you’re going to do it, no problem. If it’s something you don’t like to do and it gives bad results, again, no problem. You don’t want to do it. The problematic ones are the actions that you like to do but give bad results, or that you don’t like to do but give good results. In order to act properly in these cases, the mind has to be rested and strong so it doesn’t just give in to its likes and dislikes. You begin to get a sense of which impulses in the mind are your friends and which ones are not. Like that chant we chanted just now, “There are true friends and there are non-friends, false friends.” That doesn’t simply apply to friends outside. It also applies to the thoughts coming in and out of your mind. Some of the thoughts that come in the mind are not true friends at all. If you followed through with them, they would lead you to suffering. Other thoughts are true friends, but they may not be all that attractive. But if you hang around with them and take their advice, you’ll find that you’ll be happy for it. But the truth or the falseness of the friends here in the mind depends on the results that they lead you to. For the mind to be patient enough to follow things through from cause to result, you’ve got to get it settled. You’ve got to get it stable like this so it’s in a position where it can see things clearly, all the way from cause to result, and then back again. So you can remember what actions lead to what kind of results, what ways of thinking lead to happiness, what ways of thinking lead to suffering and pain. This is why my teacher Chan Phuong said that meditation is a way of showing goodwill for yourself. If you really are sincere in wanting happiness, you want to be systematic about it. You don’t want a happiness that simply comes and goes and depends on chance, on the chances of your mood being in the right mood that day, or things going the way you want to. That kind of happiness is undependable. But there’s a kind of happiness that you can build from within through the skillfulness of your own actions, starting with these qualities of mindfulness and alertness, ardency. Once the mind is in good shape, then no matter what happens in the world, it doesn’t make inroads into the mind. The mind is stable, secure. Because the ultimate insecurity in life is our own mind, the possibility that we might end up doing or saying or thinking things that would harm ourselves. If you can’t trust your mind not to do those things, you’re in a difficult position. So we train the mind in order to make it more trustworthy, so that it is our friend all the way through. So show some goodwill for yourself. Be friends with the breath. Develop those qualities that make the mind its own friend. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency, a strong sense of conviction, as the Buddha taught in the principle of karma, that what you do does lead to your happiness or your suffering, depending on the quality of your intention. So you work at your intentions. You work at your mind to put it in good shape. Once it’s in good shape, you can trust it. It’s a friend that won’t turn on you. But in order to have a friendship like that, you have to invest time and effort, too, in practicing the meditation, developing mindfulness, developing alertness, really getting to know the breath right here, right now, as the mind’s foundation.

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