Super-sensitivity

July, 2003

Focus on the breath coming in and going out. It’s all you’re responsible for right now, just being with the breath. Any other thoughts that come into the mind saying, “Think about this, think about that,” you can just put them aside. It’s amazing how much we let ourselves get ordered around like this in the course of the day. Thoughts come into the mind, and we have no idea where they come from. But they say, “Do this, do that.” Often, without thinking, we just go ahead and do it. An important part of the meditation is learning how to resist those impulses. Make up your mind that you’re only going to do something that you know has a good reason behind it, and it’s going to give good results. For the time being, there’s only one thing you have to focus on, and that’s trying to develop concentration in the mind, trying to develop mindfulness and alertness. Focus on the causes for what you want to have happen. If you get the causes right, the results will take care of themselves. Right now, the causes are just this. Remind yourself to stay with the breath and then be alert to the breath. Then keep at this. These three qualities are essential for all meditation. The first one is mindfulness, just reminding yourself to stay. The quality of being alert, that’s alertness, being aware of the breath coming in and going out. Sticking with it, that’s what’s called intentness or ardency. In other words, you really give yourself to the meditation. You’re not just dabbling or playing around. Let your heart and your whole awareness get immersed in the process of being with the breath. In fact, you don’t have to listen to the Dharma talk. Let it just be in the background and act as a fence. If you start pulling out of the breath, you’ll run into the sound of the Dharma talk, which will point you back in. As for anything else that comes along, just let it go. Let it go. Any other orders that come into the mind, saying, “Hey, now you’ve got a whole hour here. You can start planning next week’s projects or thinking about the next year or two,” or going back over old movies in the mind. There’s lots of free time right here, right now. But those thoughts don’t really accomplish anything. The results they get are not the results you really want. If you’re going to think clearly about the future, you want to have a good, solid state of concentration in the mind. You want your mindfulness to be sharper. You want your alertness to be clear. You want your persistence to be solid, if you’re going to think anything through clearly. So, the basic skills you need in order to think properly about the future are forged by staying with the breath right here, right now, so that when the time does come to think about the future, you’ve got a well-equipped mind, a well-trained mind, a well-exercised mind. So no matter how pressing events in the future may be, if you want to think about them properly, you’ve got to develop these qualities. So stick with these right here. This is why we bring the mind into the present moment, not because the present moment is necessarily a wonderful moment, but because it’s where all the important things are happening in life. All too often, we skim over them. The meditation gives you time to settle down. You can do it deliberately. Just focus on what’s happening in the present moment. You’ve got that intention to stay with the breath. Well, maintain it. John Lee once said there are three factors to meditation. One is the right object, in this case the breath. Make sure the breath is comfortable. The right intention, which is the intention to stay here. And then the right quality, working with the breath, working with your focus, so you can stay here with a sense of well-being, a sense of stability, that it feels good to be here. It feels nourished. It’s nourishing to be here. The breath has an awful lot to offer right here, right now, if you pay careful attention. Our problem is that we make quick, snap judgments about things and are always ready to move on, move on, move on to the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. And as a result, we don’t get to know anything really thoroughly at all. We don’t give the mind a chance to really seep into the present moment, permeate the present moment, and see what’s going on there in all those different layers. So this is why we meditate, to give ourselves a chance to really get to know the present moment in all its many manifestations, all of its ins and outs. And if you pay careful attention, you’ll see there’s a lot going on here. It’s the carefulness of your attention, the sensitivity of your attention, that makes all the difference. That’s the quality of alertness, coupled with the ardency. In other words, it’s not something of, “Well, the breath is coming in. Well, the breath is going out.” You want to know how it really feels. Be there with a direct sensation of the breathing. Notice that the sensations of the breathing may not be the ones that you normally think of. Say, just air coming in and out through the nostrils. A lot of the body is involved in the breathing process—the ribcage, the stomach, the abdomen, your back, your shoulders—because these parts are involved, and other parts get involved as well. As you get more and more sensitive to the breathing, you realize it’s a whole body process. The entire nervous system, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, is involved. And the whole sense of the energy feel in the body gets involved as well. So allow everything to permeate here. Allow your awareness to permeate through the body. Allow the breath to permeate through the body. And that will leaven things here in the present moment, lighten things up, open things up, so you can really see what’s going on. This way, the issues that you tend to skim over (say, for example, your motivation for doing something or the intentions that lie behind your actions) you get more and more in touch with them. That gives you a chance to see what you’re doing that’s skillful and what you’re doing that’s not skillful. It gives you a chance to listen to all those little voices that are going on in the mind. It’s like there’s a committee in there, and many of the voices go really fast. It’s like the subliminal messages they put into tapes or in TV programs sometimes. The idea being that if you get the message through fast enough, it gets past your normal barriers. And that wouldn’t work if the mind weren’t already doing that to itself all the time, anyhow. So as your mindfulness speeds up, you begin to get on top of what these subliminal messages are saying, and you begin to realize a lot of them are telling you crazy things, things that normally you wouldn’t even want to listen to. And they seep in because they get past that barrier by going really fast. So you’ve got to speed up your mindfulness, speed up your alertness, so you can catch these things as they’re happening. That’s the quality of sensitivity. The more and more subtle things in the mind start becoming more and more blatant because you make your awareness subtle. Give it time to seep in. You’ve got a whole hour here to get to know one thing, the breath, and how it relates to the body, how it relates to the mind. So don’t do the meditation mechanically. After all, the breath is not a mechanical process. Your mind is not a mechanical process. It’s more organic. And there are lots of subtleties, both to the breath and the mind. So you have to make your awareness as subtle as possible. If you want to see what’s going on, that way you come to understand yourself a lot better. You begin to see ways in which you act or think or speak that cause suffering for yourself and other people. And you realize that it’s not necessary. If it’s not necessary, why do it? You get better and better at blocking those vagrant orders that come through the mind. Think this, say that, feel this. These ideas may still come into the mind, but you learn how to catch them and learn how to stand in their way and offer better ideas for what you might do. This way you learn how to shape your life in a way that’s more skillful, less burdensome. Simply because you’ve exercised and developed these three factors in your mind, the mindfulness, alertness, and the ardency with which you approach the present moment. It’s pretty basic, but again, if you don’t get down to the basics, you can’t make any really basic changes in the mind. All you do is change the ornamentation. But here we’re digging down, settling in, seeping in as deep as we can into the present moment. So when you make those basic changes, the results permeate your entire awareness, they permeate your entire experience. As you see that your experience is not totally passive, you’re constantly shaping it. If you have these tools well-developed, you start shaping it in more and more skillful ways. So take time to get to know the basics, master the basics, and the results will permeate your whole life.

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