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Pay close attention to the breath. Be right on top of it each time it comes in, each time it goes out. Don’t let the process get mechanical. Don’t put it on automatic pilot. Really pay attention. How does the breath feel when it comes in? Where do you feel it? Which parts of the body would really feel good if the breath could go there? Well, allow it to go there. Think of it going there. Then pay attention to the next breath. Where would that feel good? Allow it to go there. As for whether you’re going to attain concentration or not attain concentration, don’t even have that thought in your mind. You’re here totally. Only to examine the breath. Be very careful with the breath. Pay close attention to the breath. If you come in with preconceived notions about whether it’s going to work or not tonight, whether it’s going to be a good sitting or a bad sitting, you may have those notions, but don’t give them any credence. The only thing you have to believe is the fact that you’re breathing right now. You want to study the breath as carefully as possible. Usually we find when we hit a plateau in our practice, it’s because we’re not paying attention. The little things get in the way. John Munn once said, “People very rarely get blinded by whole pieces of lumber, but sawdust, very fine sawdust, can blow in your eye and it can blind you.” So watch out for the little things. Pay close attention to the little things, because that’s all you’ve got. The bigger the abstractions you’re dealing with, the less you actually see. It’s like getting further and further away up in the air. Things below start getting hazy. You get up really high, you can’t even see people. You can’t even see houses. You can’t even see any of the details. But if you’re going to attain to right here on earth, on the level of the ground, you get down, you can really see each little grain of the dirt, each little ant coming along. So stay close, right here. Don’t let abstractions blur your vision. Don’t let your anticipations blur your vision, because they’re like clouds and fog. They pull you up away. After all, we’re meditating here to see the movements of the mind, and they’re extremely subtle. And they’re right here, and they’re very close, and yet we don’t see them. Part of it’s because we’re looking further away, and part of it is because they really are subtle things. It requires patience. It requires that you be very meticulous. It requires that you really be intent on what you’re doing. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re throwing yourself into the meditation for three hours, but really be intent for the whole breath, this whole breath, and then the next whole breath. That way, if you have five minutes of very intent meditation, it can often get you more results than three hours of sitting here with your mind wandering around or thinking about other things, or thinking about the meditation but not actually paying close attention. It’s the quality of the intention that makes all the difference. Combine your attention with the quality of what they call alertness. It’s interesting in the texts when they talk about alertness. They’re talking about being alert to what you’re doing. You turn left, you turn right. You flex your arm, you extend your arm. You stand, you walk, you sit, you lie down. You defecate, you urinate, you eat. These are all things that you do. When they’re defining alertness, they define it in these terms. What you’re doing. This is where the whole context of the teaching lies. Watching what you’re doing. The problem here is that many of our actions get so automatic that we’re used to not paying attention to them anymore. We don’t think there’s going to be anything we’re going to see. We’ve walked many times, we’ve sat many times, laid down. Many times, stood many times. That’s all old hat. We want to see something else. But actually, what we’ve done so many times, we haven’t really seen it. It’s gotten kind of automatic. That’s what we do as we meditate and as we try to be mindful and alert throughout the whole day. Be very careful in watching how you do things, because your intentions are lurking right there. The subtle movements of the mind are lurking right there behind the movements of the body. They’re hiding there. So if you want to see them first, you have to see the movement of the body. As we’re sitting here, very still, it’s the breath that’s moving. So you want to watch that, because there is an element of intention in the breath. Even in a simple, almost automatic process like this, there is an element of intention there. You want to look for that. And if you can’t see the intention yet, watch the breath, because that hones your powers of observation so that you get more and more alert. Of course, one of the basic principles of the practice is that once you get good at the practice, then you start growing. If you slough over little things, they don’t get a chance. It’s like walking down a path. There are all kinds of little seedlings on the path. And if you’re not paying attention, you step on everything indiscriminately. So along with the weeds and grasses and wildflowers on the path, you might step on seedlings for oaks and pines and other valuable trees. But because you’re not paying attention, you step on everything. But if you begin to look very carefully and see where are the useful seedlings as opposed to the useless ones, and you mark them, and at the very least you’re careful not to step on them, you find that they begin to grow. You start taking care of them as you begin to recognize that these things are worthwhile. That concentration we’ve all had. Either we’ve had very strong concentration experiences in the past or we have anticipations about them. But either way, it can get in the way of actually getting concentration. Because little moments of concentration arise in the mind, and then they go, and then they arise again, and then they go. And we say, “These are really ordinary. This is not worth anything.” So you step on them, looking for something better. It’s actually these little moments of momentary concentration that have to get stitched together into longer periods of concentration. That’s how the mind gets a good, solid place to settle down. So you have to learn how to appreciate them. And to appreciate them requires that you pay careful attention to them. Because in the beginning they don’t seem like much. There’s just a little bit of release, a little bit of letting go there. But it doesn’t seem like much. We’ve seen that before, so you move on to something else. But the question is, what would happen if you paid careful attention? What would happen if you gave a little space there? If you didn’t step on these things, where would they go? What would they do? And you find that they grow. Whether they grow fast or grow slow, they grow. And again, you don’t have to anticipate. Just pay careful attention. Tend to them. And you find that this path that you’ve walked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, who knows how many times, actually has something new to show you. You’re giving it the opportunity, giving the opportunity for the skillful states in it that you may have been stepping on, now to have a chance to grow. They can give you their shade. They can give you their fruits. They can give you their flowers. It’s a basic principle in the practice. It’s the little things matter. Basic things matter. In the Dhamma textbook they have in Thailand, they start out with pairs of important qualities, and then they move up to sets of three, sets of four, sets of five. But the pairs are really interesting, like alertness and mindfulness. These qualities, they say, benefit everything. When they list the seven factors of awakening, they talk about which factors are good for when your energy level is down and which factors are good for when they’re up. But mindfulness, and in there it means both mindfulness and alertness, is good for every occasion. Just like the qualities of shame and concern for the results of your actions. These qualities are called protectors of the world. It’s because we have a sense of shame, because we have concern for the results of our actions, that we want to practice to begin with. We don’t want to act in ways where we become our own worst enemy. We don’t want to act in ways that’ll eat away at us later. So we pay attention to what we’re doing. Pay attention to our attentions. Any idea that comes up, any motivation that comes up that you don’t feel good about, you don’t feel is honest, you just don’t do it. You realize that you’re better than that. This is the positive side of shame. Many times, psychotherapists have told us that shame is a bad thing. And the shame in the sense of having low self-esteem, that’s a bad thing. It’s harmful. It gets in the way. This is not just an American idea. How many Dhamma talks in Thailand? The Ajahns keep saying, “Don’t underestimate yourself. Don’t underestimate your potential. We all have the potential for the practice.” There were lots of Dhamma talks. Most of his students were sons of peasants, and they’d been told all their lives, “You’re at the bottom of the social rung. There’s not much hope for you guys. You’ve just got to work hard and die.” That’s what they’ve been told many times by society. But he said, “Look, you have a human body. You’ve got all thirty-two parts complete. Your mind is complete. You’ve got everything you need for awakening.” So that’s not the negative kind of shame. Shame is actually having high self-esteem and then thinking about doing something beneath you and saying, “No, I don’t want to do that. It’s beneath me. I have higher standards than that.” That’s where shame is a protector of the world. It protects you from your less skillful intentions. It protects the people around you from your less skillful intentions. This is where positive self-image is an important part of the practice. Ultimately, you’re going to put that image aside. But don’t think it’s a bad thing from the beginning. It has its uses. Same for fear of the consequences of your actions. Oftentimes we hear that fear is a bad thing, but this kind of fear is a useful fear. If we didn’t have this, people would just be going all over the place doing whatever they wanted to do—not caring, apathetic. You’ve got a sociopath reading recently about that person who was saying that if you think the compassionate thing might be to kill or whatever, don’t think about it. Just go ahead and do it. And don’t let yourself have any regrets afterwards. Just keep your mind unclouded. That’s sociopathic thinking. You’re saying, “Accept the results like a man.” What are those results going to do for you? They’ll incapacitate you. You do things that are grossly unskillful. You either get sick or you die or you go someplace where you can’t help anybody at all for a long time. That’s not useful at all. It’s because we have concerns about the results of our actions that we want to make sure that, at the very least, we don’t do anything that harms us. And if you don’t do anything that harms yourself, then you’re better positioned to help other people. This is a useful kind of fear. So keep this point in mind, even though these are very very basic qualities. The reason they’re basic is because they’re so important. They pervade the whole practice. Make sure that wherever you go, whatever you do, you’ve got these really basic qualities very firmly in mind. The pair of mindfulness and alertness, and the pair of shame and the fear of the consequences of your actions. These things help you and protect you. They also help the people around you, protect the people around you. So don’t underestimate the basic things. It’s like the old story of the mouse and the lion. The lion catches the mouse and the mouse says, “Please spare me. I promise someday I may be in a position to help you.” And the lion laughs so hard that he says, “Okay, go ahead. Let’s go.” Of course, the lion gets trapped in the net and the mouse comes along and chews up the net. So don’t underestimate the little things. Sometimes they can chew up that net that you have around your mind, the net that holds you down. And although they may take their time and you can’t rush them, still, it’s only the little things that can do that kind of work.

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