The Ennobling Path

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Try to take stock of what you’ve got right here, right now. There’s a sensation of the body sitting here and a sensation of the breathing. There’s awareness. Note the thoughts and labels that awareness is putting on things. They’re feelings. Try to leave it just at that level. Put these things together in the present moment and don’t add anything else. You’ll find, of course, the mind is constantly adding other things. But if you notice these other things piling up in the mind, just clear them away. There’s just the breath coming in and going out. That’s your sensation of the body. And you label the breath coming in, label the breath going out, and there’s a feeling either of comfort or discomfort that goes along with the breath. Try to keep it at just that level. Make that your frame of reference. And as for any ideas of who you are or what you’re doing here or what you’ve been doing or what you’re going to do in the future, just let those fall away. Because if you clutter up what you’ve got right here, right now, with these other things, you can’t see what you’ve got right here, right now. This is a very important principle in the teaching, because we’re here to deal precisely with the issue of suffering, stress, discomfort in the present moment that you’re going to find if you look very carefully. If you don’t look carefully, you go off and build other things. And you end up creating more suffering, more stress, which gets pushed into the back of your mind because you’re more interested in those other worlds that you’re going to create. You’ve got the narratives of your experience, what actually has happened, what you hope will happen. Or you can have whole worlds of other kinds build up in the mind. And that distracts you from the real issues at hand, which are the fact that there is suffering and stress and the question about why it’s caused. And what you can do about it. What can be done about it right here in the present moment. This is why the Buddha refused to answer questions about whether the world was eternal, whether the world was not eternal, whether it was finite or infinite, whether the body was the same as the soul, whether the soul was separate from the body. All the big issues that the philosophers liked to talk about in his day. He was radical. He said, “Those are totally irrelevant. The big issue is the fact that there’s suffering and people are being unskillful about it.” So we want to focus on this issue. And this is where we focus on it, just simply what you’ve got right here, right now, without adding anything or without taking anything away. Just looking at things as they are, directly experienced. And for most of us, we can stay here for a little while, but then the old habits kick in and we start creating this issue, start creating that issue. And all that does is just cover things up. So as soon as these other issues come into the mind, notice them as events in the present moment. They’ll come in as little signposts that say, “Look here. Look there.” And they’ll draw your attention away. And as long as you realize that it’s just a signpost, and don’t let yourself get tricked into looking in line with the arrow, you’re okay. It comes, it goes. You’re aware of it as an event, not as a world you want to get into. So we’re sitting here watching events in the present moment. In fact, that’s all there is, is events in the present moment. But they have this trick of turning into signposts, creating other worlds. Even though the act of creating that other world is something that’s going on in the present moment, once you get in that frame of reference, you seem to be someplace else. There’s a moment of blanking out before you shift frames. So try to watch for that. The more consistently you can be aware of the breath, the more consistently you can be aware of how the mind is staying with the breath, the less likelihood there is for those worlds to get created for you to change your frame of reference and go off someplace else for a while. This practice goes against a lot of the mind’s habits. After all, the mind is a creator. It keeps cooking things up. Once there’s craving, then there’s going to be clinging. Once there’s clinging, then there’s the creation of these worlds that the mind likes to inhabit. And it keeps forgetting that as soon as you inhabit them, they start falling apart and you’ve got to get out. And then you go back and you create another one, and then another. The process just keeps up. The question is, are you ever going to learn the lesson that there’s no true happiness to be found there? The reason we look for true happiness there is because we think that this is all there is. We’ve never seen the happiness that the Buddha promises in terms of nirvana. So the only escape we can see from the discomfort in the present is to run away from the present. But you can never really run away from the present. You’ve just got to keep coming back, coming back. So what we’re doing as we’re meditating is looking here to see if there’s a different way of dealing with it, looking at things directly as they are, as they happen. As the Buddha said, when you break down the present moment in this way, you just see dhammas. The word dhamma here can mean phenomenon, it can mean event, it can mean activity. Just looking at things as they’re directly experienced. However you want to conceive that term dhamma is fine, as long as you’re right with things as they’re experienced, the movements of the mind. Again, looking at what’s here, not adding anything, not taking anything away, and trying to bring the mind to singleness, a sense of being one here in the present moment, instead of being scattered about in little bits and pieces. When the mind settles down, try to get it to stay there. This is one of the aspects of the path. The Buddha says you develop the path. The heart of the path is right concentration, so you want to develop that. Concentration has to stay with this frame of reference. This is why right mindfulness is always used as a predecessor for right concentration. Right mindfulness is what establishes our frame of reference. Here we are with the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves. The in and of themselves is the important part. You don’t turn them into other things. Just directly here with the experience you’ve got, and then maintain that level as your frame of reference. The longer you can maintain that, that in and of itself develops a quality of concentration. If you maintain it with a sense of skill and adjusting things so that it’s a good place to stay, then the mind can settle down. Once it settles down, then allow it to stay there. Maintaining is a difficult part of the practice. Anyone can look at the breath for a little while, but it’s looking at it for long, extended periods of time. That’s what makes the real difference in the mind. It’s a little bit, a little bit, a little bit, but over time the little bits add up. And the continuity is what keeps that frame of reference going. You don’t lose track. So you don’t miss things that are happening right here in the present moment. This is where the ignorance is that they talk about as a cause of suffering. It’s those little gaps in your awareness, lapses in your mindfulness. Interesting things happen there, but we black out for just a moment and then we come back. But in the meantime, a lot has happened. Those are the dharmas, those are the phenomena you really want to look at. What happens when the mind pulls a curtain over part of itself? So this is what the maintaining is. It’s trying to keep everything open and aware. Once you maintain it, then look for where there’s some disturbance, even in the concentration. Because, as the Buddha says, there’s lots of levels of concentration. They get more and more subtle, less and less of a feeling of disturbance, less and less a feeling of burdensomeness in the mind. So as the mind gets settled in, gets the opportunity to stay here for a good while, you begin to get more sensitive to what you did to get the mind here and what you’re doing to keep it staying here. But then you really don’t have to because it’s begun to settle in. Certain factors of the concentration, like having to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, or having to evaluate the breath, there comes a point when those are no longer necessary. The breath feels good coming in, the breath feels good going out. You can really bore into the breath and feel like you’re penetrating it. There’s a sense of oneness with the body, with breath and mind. At that point, you don’t have to keep reminding yourself. A John Fuhrman’s example is a water buffalo. You’ve got to call your water buffalo. It’s gone away. But once it’s back, you don’t have to call it again. It’s here. So you can stop calling it. That’s one little disturbance that you can drop. You keep going through the layers like this, settling in for a while, and then you begin to see that something you’re doing or something that’s going on in the meditation is really no longer necessary. You can still stay here without doing that. You drop that. All these factors of being with things simply as they are, looking for whatever disturbance is there and letting yourself drop that disturbance, watching what’s going on without adding anything or taking anything away, all of this is called dwelling in emptiness, or emptiness as a dwelling for the mind. We’re not creating narratives out of our experience. We’re not creating worldviews. We’re just looking at things as they’re directly experienced and allowing the mind to come to a sense of unity, a sense of oneness. That’s your dwelling. The emptiness lies in clearing away any sense of disturbance and also clearing away any additions that you would give to the present moment that don’t really have to be there. So at whatever level of concentration you can maintain, work at keeping it going until you realize that there are a few things you’re doing that are unnecessary. It’s like learning to walk. Notice when a child starts walking that a lot of the motions are unnecessary. The child still hasn’t figured out which muscles are really necessary for walking and which ones are not. So the child tends to use too many. And of course it gets worn out because, one, the muscles aren’t really developed that way yet, and secondly, they’re using too many. But over time you get a better and better sense of which ones are necessary, which ones are not. The necessary ones get stronger so they can start taking over. And the unnecessary ones don’t have to be involved in the walking. So the meditation is progressively a matter of letting go of unnecessary burdens. So this teaching on dwelling and emptiness, even though it’s basically a concentration teaching, is also an insight teaching as well. You look for the disturbance, whatever changes, whatever is stressful. That’s two of the three characteristics right there. And you let it go. You don’t try to create any sense of you around it. You don’t create anything more than there. You don’t add anything to it. You don’t take anything away. That’s the essence of the teaching on not-self. And it’s simply a matter of staying with it so that it gets more and more developed so you can see more and more precisely where those unnecessary burdens are, where the disturbances are. So in the beginning it’s more an emphasis on trying to maintain the oneness and not lose your frame of reference. But as you develop, the emphasis switches more and more to the discernment side. But the two are not really separate. It’s simply a question of emphasis for the mind to work through that problem of suffering and stress, to comprehend the suffering, to understand the path, as we chanted just now. Not only to understand, you have to develop it. It requires both the qualities of serenity, concentration, and the qualities of insight, discernment. They go hand in hand. So this is a different kind of discernment from the one that we use in normal, everyday activities. It’s one that penetrates the concentration, one that goes along with the concentration and is devoted to making the concentration more and more solid, keeping you right here in the present moment as much as possible. So discernment does things. It just doesn’t sit there and watch. It actually helps to create the sense of stillness, create the unity that we want to work on, until ultimately it turns around and looks at the whole process of creating the concentration, takes that apart, which opens up to something totally other, totally different from what’s gone before. But the process itself of looking for the disturbance, letting it go, or letting go of the things that cause that disturbance. Once you’ve got your basic framework of being here in the present moment, that’s what the work is, no matter what the level of your concentration, what the level of your discernment. I’m trying to develop a 360-degree vision so you can see wherever that level of disturbance is and what’s going along with it, what you can let go of. That’s what the path is all about. The path does allow you to comprehend suffering, which is comprehending those disturbances, letting go of the cause, and also realizing the end of suffering. You’re learning both about the conditioned and ultimately it opens you up to be aware of the unconditioned as well. This is why the path is said to be noble. It starts with ordinary, everyday things. It turns them into something noble. The breath starts with your awareness, your feelings, your perceptions, your consciousness, and turns them into something that can take you to another dimension entirely. In that way, it should be called an ennobling path. It takes these normal things that we use to create our experience, to create our sense of self, and it turns them into something better, gives them a more noble purpose. But to make these things noble, you have to look at precisely what you really have right here, right now. Try not to lose sight of that frame of reference. Try not to lose touch with it. The more clearly you can see what you’ve got right here, right now, the easier it is to make something noble out of it. you

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