June 18, 2024

Focus on your breath. You can focus anywhere on the body where you can see clearly that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. You don’t have to focus on the feeling of the air in the nose. You can focus simply on the movement of the body, because that too is a kind of breath. It’s an energy that flows through the body. In fact, it’s the movement that pulls the air in and out of the lungs. Allow that movement to be comfortable. Breathe with whichever part of the body feels that it would like to breathe. Open your mind to the possibility that any part of the body can get involved. Explore a bit to see what rhythm of breathing feels best, what depth of breathing feels best. Sometimes a shallow breath feels good. Sometimes nice, deep breathing feels good. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes medium. Long or short. Heavy or light. There are lots of different variations to the breath. And because it’s an area of our awareness that we tend to block out as we’re thinking about other things, it’s good to take this time to get reacquainted with it. After all, the breath is what keeps the body alive, keeps the body and the mind together. It’s the part of the body that’s closest to the mind. So when the breath feels good, it not only feels good physically, there’s also a sense of mental ease that comes along with it. You’re soothing the body. You’re soothing the body and the mind, both. When the sense of the breath gets comfortable, the next thing you have to watch out for is for the mind’s awareness to shrink down to a tiny point. Because this is what happens as you fall asleep. The breath gets comfortable and your awareness of the body gets smaller and smaller and smaller and then disappears. So to prevent that, as soon as there’s a sense of ease, start exploring different parts of the body. Once you’ve got one part of the body comfortable, try adding other parts as well. You can do one section at a time, or you can do it more in an additive way. So you’ve got the abdomen, then you move up, get the stomach, so then you have both the abdomen and the stomach. And then you can add the chest, the neck, or you can work at one section at a time. Whatever seems most convenient, seems easiest. And then allow the breath to take some time to soothe the body, to soothe the mind. This sense of ease and well-being in the meditation is extremely important. After all, we’re here looking for true happiness. That’s the wish that underlies all the Buddhist teachings. If the Buddha were not himself concerned with true happiness, he would never have formulated the Four Noble Truths. The whole purpose of those truths is to put an end to suffering, to open the mind up to a happiness that’s not subject to conditions. That’s an extreme wish for happiness. That was what motivated him to leave home. Once he’d found that happiness, that’s what motivated him to teach other people, because it was such a good thing. All the seemingly abstract teachings come out of this wish for happiness. The reason he taught Dependent Core Arising was so that you can understand happiness. He taught the three characteristics so you can use them as touchstones to see if you’ve reached that true happiness yet or not. If it’s something that’s changeable, stressful, not self, that’s obviously not what you’re looking for. So you dig deeper. The problem is, in that art, the quest for true happiness, the obstacle is not a desire for misery or pain. The obstacle is our makeshift ways of trying to look for a quick fix, our strategies for quick and easy happiness. That’s less than ideal. Those are the habits we have to unlearn. But they’re hard to unlearn, because so many times our very fragile sense of well-being in the present moment depends so much on them. We don’t like to have them touched. So in order to get ourselves more comfortable about touching them, probing into them, examining them, we have to provide the mind with an alternative place to stay, an alternative sense of well-being. So we work with the breath to make the breath comfortable, allow the mind to settle down with the breath, allow them to melt into each other. So there comes a point where the awareness and the breath seem to be one. And however long it takes to stay there, you stay there. You don’t have to be in a great hurry to move on to the next level of jhana or to start insight meditation thinking that concentration is a waste of time. It’s not a waste of time. It’s the heart of the path. The Buddha once characterized the path as right concentration with seven supporting factors. So we want to work on the heart and allow the heart to stay alive and beating, to do its work, to change the center of gravity in the mind. And that allows us to look into the ways that we try to shore up our sense of ordinary happiness. And see through them to see that there really is a lot of stress and pain and burdensomeness involved in them. Whether we try to shore up our sense of self-esteem through denial, or focusing on the faults of other people, or distracting ourselves with interesting intellectual ideas, or simply setting ourselves up to teach other people, whatever it is that we do to create our sense of self-esteem. It’s not bad to have self-esteem, but if your self-esteem depends on those things, it’s fragile. We’re trying to find a more resilient, longer-lasting sense of well-being that doesn’t have to depend on those strategies. But that’s where you want to look. Sometimes you think that once you get into concentration, then you look at the three characteristics in an abstract way. The question isn’t the abstract. It’s the mind’s strategies for creating a happiness that are not lasting. That’s where you want to start taking apart, because that’s what actually causes so much stress and suffering in the world, both for yourself and for the people around you. But to take those strategies apart, you have to have a very strong sense of well-being. That’s why we work with the breath. That’s why we try to develop good, solid states of concentration in the mind, so that when we look into our cheap strategies for making happiness, we realize they are pretty cheap. We don’t really want them. At that point, though, the insight is not threatening. As long as we feel threatened by insight, we’re not going to want to go along with it. But once you start seeing through it, you realize that you don’t really need it, because you’ve got something better. That way, you’re more willing to let go. So the sense of ease that we’re working on here is extremely important. However long it takes to develop this new center of gravity, be willing to put in the time. And you’ll find the mind complaining. It’s boring, nothing’s happening, you’re not learning anything. Think of it as a healing process. If you’ve got a big wound, you’re willing to put in the time for it to heal. You may get a little impatient, but you realize if you don’t give it time to heal, you’re going to have long problems. So concentration practice is meant to be a healing practice. It means giving space to put in the time for the parts of the mind that you ordinarily shut off. Space to your awareness of the body, the parts of the body that you ordinarily shut off. Those are the ones that need the healing the most. So when you get a sense of well-being that comes from the breath, allow it to spread to other parts of the body, too. Let everybody have their share here. Develop an appreciation for the concentration. It may seem dull. When I’m working, staying with the breath, staying with the breath, and finally part of the mind will complain, “This is dumb. I’m not learning anything. It’s not clever at all.” The important part of the meditation is that I finally learn not to listen to that voice. And when you learn not to listen to that voice, you see through a lot of mistaken ideas that lie behind that voice. Whatever voice it is that complains, this is an important part of the practice all the way through. We put certain restraints on the mind, because it’s through the restraints that we dig up things that otherwise lie hidden. If you’re constantly going with the flow, everything flows, nothing complains, and you don’t learn anything. But we run up against the basic principles of the practice of renunciation. Everybody likes renunciation, but you learn a lot from it. The precepts. You suddenly find yourself running up against the things that you would ordinarily like to say or like to do. Yesterday in the Dhamma discussion group, we were talking about how people allow themselves to say little white lies and never really understand why they’re doing it until they decide that they’re not going to say anything that’s false at all. Suddenly, you run up against precisely why it was that you liked to tell the little white lies, whether it was to be pleasing to other people or to smooth things over, or whatever the motivation. You see the motivation when you place a blockade in. It’s like knowing the strength of a current in a river. You know the strength of the current when you try to put a dam across the river. Suddenly, what may have seemed like a placid river with nothing much happening suddenly reveals itself to have a very strong current down at the bottom, which you wouldn’t have known if you hadn’t tried to put up the dam. It’s the same with concentration practice. We’re saying for a while, “No thinking about anything else. Just be with the breath.” And the mind is going to struggle. It’s going to plead, and it’s going to whine, and it’s going to complain. And you learn not to listen to it, at least not listen to it in the sense of not following its recommendations. After a while, you stop following its recommendations, and it’s going to start coming up with reasons. That’s when you begin to see interesting things about the mind, things that lay under the surface, and why your sense of self-worth suddenly gets involved in your ability to think about other things. And it’s liberating to learn how to put that aside. The practice of concentration is like the monk’s rules. When you first ordain, all you can think of are the things that you can’t do, and it feels confining. Then suddenly you realize there’s an awful lot of free time that you gain by following the rules. You don’t have to worry about food, clothing, shelter—that’s provided. You don’t have to gauge the ordinary give and take of social relationships that are not based on the Dhamma. There’s a lot of freedom that comes along with it. It’s the same with concentration practice. You find yourself unable to think about this, think about that. But after a while you begin to realize there’s an awful lot to explore here, right in the present moment. And the mind reveals itself in ways that you wouldn’t have expected. So even though the mind may rebel against the practice—wants to think about this, wants to think about that—you don’t have to give in. It’s through not giving in and yet maintaining the same sense of ease with the breath that things start coming up. And you’re in a position to deal with them because you’re standing with a place of strength, a sense of well-being that comes with strength. It’s not as precarious and fragile as your old sense of well-being. And even though the concentration itself is not the goal, it’s part of the path. And it’s not a path that promises all its results at the end. Results come as you’re walking along the path all along. So look for the sense of comfort, the sense of ease that the path promises. We read in the Four Noble Truths about suffering. We think, “My gosh, the Buddha seems to be so pessimistic. Where is the space for happiness?” Well, it’s tucked away here in right concentration. Peace, pleasure, well-being, rapture, even. And it’s the heart of the path.

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