Cutting Through Disturbances

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Try to see how close you can get to the breath without a lot of layers of commentary in between you and the breath. Inhabit the breath. Allow yourself to be bathed by the breath. These are some techniques for getting the mind to settle down as quickly as possible. It’s common to sit down to meditate and think you’ve got a whole hour before you. You can take a little while to settle down. But that’s being heedless. That’s being complacent. You want to cut through as much of the verbiage that separates you from the breath. It’s almost like there are layers of dust that have been settling on the breath. Ever since you last focused on it, all the commentary that you’ve been thinking about gets laid down as a layer of dust on the breath. And then the next idea, and the next idea, and there’s lots of dust there, or lots of layers of sediment between you and the breath. So focus on the breath in such a way that cuts right through all of that as immediately as possible. The more quickly you can do it, the more effective it is. Because the breath is right here. The more right here it is, the more right now it is. Then there’s no time for that dust to stay. There’s nothing for it to stay on. You can blow it away without even having to think of focusing on it. Keep that state of immediacy going as much as you can. Don’t think about how long you have to keep it going and how easy it would be to slip back to your old habits. Be right here, right now, all the time. As quickly and as immediately as possible. The word “immediate” has two meanings. Immediate in the sense of being right next to it, and also right away. Put those two together. And you find you’re right at the breath. It may feel a little disorienting because you’re not falling back in your normal commentaries of things. But with a little bit of practice, you find that it’s a better place to be. And with a little bit more practice, you find that you can stay here, stay balanced right here, more solidly than you could floating around in your old habits. Be as immediate as possible with each breath. Sense it as soon as it comes in, as soon as it stops. Try to sense any sense of discomfort that comes in when the breath begins to get a little bit too long, as you pull too long, or as you try to squeeze it out a little too much at the end. Sometimes we do that subconsciously as a way of marking the beginning and the end of the breath. So try to find an area where there’s little difference between the in-breath and the out-breath. There’s no difference at all. See that. Where is that spot in the body? Where is that spot in your awareness? Focus there. See if you can catch yourself as you put a little subconscious squeeze at the end of the breath or a little pulling at the beginning. And just let that not happen. This requires that you get very close to the breath, so close that it seems like you can’t focus your mind in the normal way on the breath, the way you would normally focus on an idea or focus on a word. It’s like the focal length of your mind has to go out a certain way before things get into focus, and it’s a little bit too close. It’s like when you point a camera at a flower and you get too close to the flower. It refuses to get into focus at all. That’s precisely what you want. Because anything that’s within that kind of focal range, within the verbal focal range of the mind, gets blurred out this way. And you’re right here with the breath, right here with the immediate sensation of the breathing. How long can you keep it up? Don’t worry. Just right now. Right now. Once you can do this, there’s not a lot to say. Then it becomes a trick of maintaining it, not allowing yourself to switch out to those verbal levels or the blatantly verbal levels. If you get to know this immediate area of the awareness, you’ll find ultimately there is a little bit of commentary going on inside, but it’s a different level. It’s a different strata in the mind. But to see that, you have to stay here for a long time. So as long as you can keep your awareness on this layer, this level, this frequency right here, then it just becomes a trick of staying there, staying there, staying there, noticing when the mind tends to switch back to its further out focal length and see how quickly you can bring it back. This is why the practice of concentration is so important for mindfulness, because it’s catching these subtle changes between one level of awareness and another. One allows you to develop skill in your concentration, and two allows you to gain some insight into how the mind works. These things happen very quickly. You have to be quicker than they are. This is what’s meant by heightened awareness. Sometimes you hear people talk about stump concentration, where you blank out. That’s one way of getting concentrated in the present moment. Occasionally it has its uses, but for the purpose of developing mindfulness and discernment, you want this kind of concentration. It’s quick, quick, quick, quick to notice things, quick to disperse any little bit of tension, quick to see where it comes, quick to see how it can be dispersed, and how to maintain vigilance so you can be quick to see it the next time, wherever it’s going to form the next time. This is that kind of awareness that Dhammakamdhi talked about in Huni and said it’s the concentration of a hunter. The hunter has to be very still but very alert. Still enough not to disturb the animals, but alert enough not to miss even the slightest sign of when an animal is coming. So we’re here to hunt for insights into what’s going on. I don’t think of it so much as hunting for insights, just hunting to see what’s going to disturb us, and learning to let go of that disturbance as quickly as possible, not build it into something else. One of the Buddha’s primary teachings on emptiness is just this issue of the presence and absence of disturbance in the mind. Who’s disturbing the mind? We are, of course. There are sounds outside, events outside. It’s because we go latching on to them and making issues out of them. That’s why they disturb us. If we didn’t latch on, if we didn’t go rushing out after them, there wouldn’t be any disturbance or be in the background where it wouldn’t take over the mind. So the disturbances we really have to watch out for are the ones where we can create the disturbance out of habit. And, of course, those are the ones that are hardest to see, because we’re in them when we allow the mind to focus in a certain way, to think in a certain way. But if you learn to cut them off as quickly as possible, you come down to a different level entirely. You catch the mind in the act, and you can stop it, just let it go, let it go. That mind-state that’s going to go flowing out after things, you let it disband. Again, the quicker you are to see it, the more solid your concentration gets. So we’re doing quick concentration here, not quick in the sense of only for a few minutes, but quick in the sense of being alert to whatever’s happening and having our tools ready so that nothing can disturb this sense of immediacy we have right here.

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