Real Issues, The

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Focus your attention on your breath. It can be in any part of the body where it’s easy to see now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Let the breath be comfortable. Try not to force it too much or to force yourself into a trance. Just keep tabs of the breath, how the breath is feeling as it comes in, goes out, and what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. Sometimes, if you’re tired, you want to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you’re tense, try to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. You have the choice to breathe in any way you want. That’s one of our freedoms that doesn’t even need a constitution to guarantee it. You’re entirely free to relate to the breath in any way at all, so try to do it in a skillful way, a way that leads to a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of stability in the present moment. As for the Dhamma talk, let that be in the background. The purpose of the talk is to give you directions, keep you pointed at the breath. So don’t look at the finger that’s doing the pointing. Look at the object that you’re being pointed to, staying with the breath in the present moment. Because that’s where the issues are, your awareness in the present moment. What you’re doing right now, the basic issues that the Buddha addressed, was the whole question of what you’re doing to create suffering, to create stress for yourself, needlessly. Bhakti once said that all he taught was the issue of stress and suffering and the cessation of stress and suffering. That’s it. People tried to entangle him in other issues. Do we really exist? Do we not exist? How do we exist after death? How do we exist after rebirth? After we’ve gained awakening? Those are issues he put aside, because they’re distractions. He kept pointing people to this issue. What are you doing right now that’s causing stress? How can you stop doing that? People kept pushing away, pulling away to other issues. There was once a case of a monk who came to see the Buddha and said, “If you don’t answer my questions,” and he had questions about whether the universe was a eternal or not, or infinite or not, whether the life force was the same as the body or something separate, what was the status of an awakened person after death? Did the awakened person exist, not exist, both, neither? The Buddha refused to answer. Those weren’t the issues, he said. The issue was the suffering that we’re causing for ourselves right here and now. He gave the example of a man shot by an arrow. He goes to the doctor, and the doctor gets ready to remove the arrow. The man says, “Wait a minute. Before you take out this arrow, I want to know who shot it, what kind of wood the arrow was made out of, what kind of feathers the arrow was made out of, and so on down the line.” As the Buddha said, the person would die before the arrow would be removed if he insisted on getting those questions answered. Some people complain that the Buddha is focusing on a rather lowly issue here. They’re stressed and suffering with their bigger issues. Are we all interconnected? Are we not interconnected? Do we have a cosmic identity or not? But as he pointed out, those are not the real problems. Once you solve this problem, all the other problems in the mind are solved. This problem of the stress and suffering you cause yourself. So this is why we focus on the present moment, try to keep our focus here, to see what’s happening, to see exactly what we’re doing. We’re constantly doing things in the present moment, yet very rarely are we aware of what we’re doing. It’s that lack of awareness that allows us to do things that are unskillful. So we try to bring our awareness to the present moment and keep it here. One way to keep it here is to give it something pleasant to stay with. So we try to make the breath into something pleasant to stay with. The more you get a sense of ease and well-being with the breath, the easier it is to stay here. The steadier your gaze and the present moment, if you’re rocking back and forth into the present and out into the present and out, what you see is going to be rocking back and forth as well. So we want to make your awareness of the present as steady as possible, as solid and settled as possible. That requires both stillness and tranquility on the one hand and insight on the other. Try to make the mind as still as you can and then notice where there still is some kind of unstillness there, where the issues are that keep pulling you away. Learn to understand those things as they’re happening and then you can let go of them. That’s the insight. Some people think that meditation has to start out with tranquility and then move to insight, or that the only really valuable part of the practice is the insight, and that tranquility can be pretty minimal. But the Buddha never taught that way. Always the two of these have to go together. You practice both of them together to bring the mind to really good, solid states of concentration. Once the mind is well-concentrated, then it can further its tranquility, further its insight. So all these things work together. You may lean in one direction or another at any time in your practice, but they always have to be there to some extent. So focus on what sense of ease and well-being you can get in the breath. Maximize that. As for the pains here and there in the body, you don’t have to focus too much attention on them. Sometimes if you focus on them, you make them worse. That’s because the mind doesn’t yet have a good foundation. Once it has a good foundation, then you can start analyzing the issues of pain in the body. You can analyze physical pain and mental pain, mental discomfort. You can see what you’re doing. That drags these things into the mind and makes them more and more burdensome. But in order to see them clearly, you’ve got to give yourself a good, solid foundation. So this is what we’re doing. We’re focusing on what sense of ease you can develop in the breath, and then allow that sense of ease to spread throughout the body. Think of it running along the nerves, out the body, out the blood vessels, out to every pore of your skin, all around you. Maximize the well-being here. As you’re doing this, it’s not just an exercise you do while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. As you get more and more in touch with your breath, you realize you can do this any time, because the breath is always there. Your sense of the body is always there. It’s simply a question of paying attention or not. And the more steadily you can pay attention, the more you see. At the same time, you’re giving yourself a greater and greater sense of groundedness in whatever situation you find yourself in. When the mind feels grounded like this, it has a support, it has a sense of nourishment. The greater the sense of nourishment here, the less you have to go around looking for your nourishment outside in what other people do or what other people say or think. Things you see or things you hear. The mind is always feeding, always looking for good things to feed on. If it can’t find good things to feed on, it will feed on bad things and find some satisfaction there. Some people like to feed on the bad things they see in other people, as if that gives some sort of nourishment. That group of people is no good. This group of people is no good. This person, that person. That’s pretty miserable nourishment for the mind. And the reason you feed there is because you’re not giving yourself better nourishment inside. But if you give yourself this sense of grounding, this sense of ease and well-being that comes from the breath, you find that the mind is less interested in those things outside. It’s not that you don’t notice them, it’s just that they don’t become obsessive in the mind. At the same time, you don’t get disappointed when you don’t find the things outside that you like. You’ve got your own source of food here, which means you can go anywhere. It’s like a person who has food in his knapsack. You can go anywhere. You can go out in the slick rock of Utah, which has no food at all. And yet you’ve got your own source of food, so you don’t starve. It’s the same with training the mind to be with the breath, to get a sense of well-being here. You can go into almost any situation, and yet find that your sense of inner well-being doesn’t have to be affected. This is why this is an important skill, not only here as you’re sitting with your eyes closed, but when you take it with you wherever you go. Not only does it give you that sense of well-being, it helps you see yourself more clearly. As soon as there’s the slightest stirring of greed, anger, delusion, or fear in the mind, you see it right away because it affects the breath. It’s happening right here, and you’re right here to see it. If you’re off someplace else and these things start bubbling up in the back of your mind, many times it’s not until they’re really full-blown that you notice what’s happening. By that time, they’ve taken over, and it’s very difficult to work your way out from them. But if you can catch these things at the slightest beginning, you can disperse them. You can disband them simply by breathing right through the tension that builds up around them. That way, they don’t have a toehold in your body. They don’t make as many inroads on your mind. So the skill of being with the breath is an important one that you take wherever you go. It’s a foundation both for a sense of well-being in the present moment and a foundation for being able to see yourself more clearly, to see exactly what you’re doing that’s creating unnecessary stress and suffering for yourself. You learn how to stop doing it, because once you see it’s stressful, once you see that it’s not necessary, who’s going to continue doing it? It’s largely because we don’t understand our patterns of behavior and we think that they have to be that way. But we don’t drop them. It’s realizing the possibility that things don’t have to be the way we’ve been doing them and that the problem does lie right here. It doesn’t lie outside. It lies in our own actions, that willingness to look at your own actions to see where they might be improved. This is absolutely essential for the practice. It’s actually absolutely essential for seeing not only suffering, but also the cessation of suffering, how to put an end to all those problems. That’s the good news of the Buddhist teachings. The problem lies in here, but also the solution lies in the qualities that we develop in the mind, that we train in the mind. It’s starting with the breath. There are many other meditation techniques, many other meditation strategies as well, but get used to this one as your home base, because this is where everything comes together. It’s where you’re not so much to study the Buddhist teachings as to use those teachings to study your own minds, what’s going on in the present moment. Always keep your attention focused there. As you read the Dhamma, listen to the Dhamma, keep coming back to what you’re doing in the present moment, because that’s where the problem lies and that’s where the solution can be found as well. Once you finally work through this problem and you discover all those other issues that may have been lurking around in your mind, get resolved. Either you see that they weren’t important or you see that they do have answers. You see what the answers are. The answer is why something was a problem, or else you realize that the problem was a totally false one to begin with. But either way, this is a practice that clears up all the issues in the mind.

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