Relaxed Focus, A

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Try to gather your thoughts and bring them all into one spot. In other words, think about the breath and notice how it feels. Watch it for a while as it comes in, watch it for a while as it goes out, and notice whether you like it or not. If it feels tense or constricted or tight, allow it to loosen up a bit. One of our problems in practicing concentration is that as soon as we focus on something, we make it tense. So you have to unlearn that habit in such a way that you can stay focused and yet not tense up around the object you’re focusing on. After all, the purpose of getting the mind concentrated and still is so that you can see. If all you see is tension, you’re not really seeing things as they are. So you’re working in that direction. Even though there’s an element of will going into this, it’s using your will for a useful purpose. Too many people come to meditation thinking that they’ve got to totally abandon their will. That’s one extreme. The opposite extreme, of course, is trying to force your will on everything around you. As with so many things in the Buddhist teachings, we find the middle way in between the two—learning to be sensitive to what things you can will to change and what things you can’t. The only way you can learn that is through experimentation, by trying. So work with the breath for a while and see what can be changed to make it more comfortable. When you reach a point where it can’t be made more comfortable, then you sit with it. This way you give yourself something to explore. As we said, you’re gathering your thoughts. You’re not wiping thoughts out of your mind. You can’t really let go of thinking until you learn how to think in a useful way, a skillful way, in a way that helps bring the mind to peace. So you think about the breath and you evaluate it. This way you’re using your thinking processes for good purpose. There are so many things that happen in the mind that eventually you’re going to be letting go. But in the meantime, you have to learn how to use them skillfully. Only then can you let them go. So get to know the breath. Try to be on good terms with the breath. After all, it’s the basic force that’s keeping your body and mind together. So as you’re focusing on it, learn to relate to it in a way that you like it. Once you like it, then it’s easier to stay there. John Fu, my teacher, made an analogy. He said it’s like trying to catch eels. One way of catching eels that they use in Thailand is to take a dead dog and you put it in a jar. Now, eels like dead things to feed on. So you take that and put it in the jar and you put it down in the mud and the eels will come on their own. If you try to jump down and just catch the eels on your own, just using your bare hands, they’re going to slip out every which way. But if you give the eels something that they like, they’re going to come and they’re going to stay. Just go into the jar and then you can pick up the jar and there you are. You’ve got your eels. It may not be a pretty analogy, but it’s an apt one. You give the mind something that it likes and then it’ll stay. If you want a prettier analogy, think about raising a child. If you beat the child and treat it harshly, then it’s not going to stay at home. Even if you lock the windows and doors and put guards on all sides of the house, the child is going to try to figure out a way to get out. But if you treat the child well, give it warmth, give it security, give it understanding, the child will be a lot happier to stay there. It’s the same with the mind. To catch the mind and bring it into the present moment. You can’t use a rope, you can’t drag it, and you give it something that it likes. It likes a sense of comfort, it likes a sense of ease and well-being, it likes a sense of expansiveness. So think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Wherever there’s tension or tightness, think of loosening it up a bit. So the next time you breathe, it’ll feel more comfortable in that spot. Then evaluate that breath to see where things can be improved. Keep at this. You’ll find that the breath can really become absorbing, something you like to be with. This is one of the skills that’s necessary in sticking with the path, to make it something you like to do. As the Buddha pointed out, there are four types of things in the world. There are things that you like to do and give good results, things that you don’t like to do and give good results, things that you like to do and give bad results. So the things that you don’t like and give bad results, that’s a no-brainer. You’re not going to do them. Things that you like to do and give good results, that’s a no-brainer, too. You’re going to do them. The point that requires intelligence, as he said, it’s a measure of your intelligence, is how you deal with the things that you like to do and give bad results and the things you don’t like to do and give good results. So they’re going to be parts of the path. They’re going to be difficult. To help you along, look for the parts that are enjoyable. The meditation is meant to be enjoyable. You focus on an object that you like. Once you find something that you like, you stay with it. The breath is very useful because it can be changed. If you don’t like heavy breathing, you can try short breathing. If you don’t like heavy, you can use light. If you don’t like light, you can use heavy. If you don’t like short, you can use long. There are lots of variations and lots of ways of shaping the breath, adjusting the breath, not by forcing it, but simply thinking. If it’s not comfortable short, just think to yourself, “A little longer next time,” and the body will comply. This way it gets easier and easier for the mind to settle down and feel at home right here in the present moment. When it feels at home, then it can watch what’s going on. It can see things clearly. If it’s always moving around, it’s like a person jumping around. You’re trying to observe something very precise. You jump around, you move around, you can’t really get any precise observations because you’re moving. You have to be still in order to see what else is still. If you see that things are moving, at least you know it’s they’re the ones that are moving, it’s not you are moving. So it is with trying to understand the mind. You have to get your attention still. You have to get your mindfulness and alertness focused on one point. Then you can see what’s moving and what’s not moving. It’s like looking up at the clouds in the sky. If you lie in an open field with no points of reference on the ground that you can see, you look up in the sky and you’re not really sure, “Is that cloud up there moving or is it not moving? Which direction is it going if it is moving?” But if you have a point of reference, the top of a tree, a telephone pole, the peak of a roof, something like that, you can focus on that. You know that that is still. Then in reference to that, you can see what’s moving and what’s not. It’s the same with the mind. You get the mind with the breath. You get your attention with the breath. Keep it here as long as you can. Then you get a sense of what is and what isn’t moving in the mind. This is particularly important as you’re trying to understand the whole problem of ignorance. As the Buddha said, “Ignorance is the ultimate cause of suffering.” It’s because of ignorance that we have craving. Craving goes through clinging and on into suffering. What are you ignorant about? It’s not some philosophical theory that you’re ignorant about. You just don’t know the movements of your own mind, how your mind moves into things, how it creates suffering out of things. The mind is constantly creating these little worlds inside, a little thought world about this, a thought world about your home, a thought world about school, a thought world about your work. As soon as it appears in the mind, you jump into it. The appearance of the thought world is called becoming. The jumping into it is called birth on the level of the mind. We find ourselves in these worlds and then we begin to suffer because they can’t last. It takes an awful lot of energy to keep them going. So you have to leave them and go into another one. You’ve probably noticed that if you were to trace your train of thought in the course of the day, it really wouldn’t be a train. If the train ran like your thoughts do, the company would lose money. It would be impossible for the train. Anyhow, trains have to go along long lines that gradually curve. They have violent switches here and there. The train is going to fall off the tracks. So calling it a train of thought is not really a good analogy. We call it your ping-pong ball of thought. It jumps here, it jumps there, it bounces back and forth. If you tried to trace it, you’d have just a big scribble all over the place. That’s because the mind can’t stay in any one of its thought worlds very long. Either the thought world begins to disintegrate or it begins to get very unpleasant, so you jump out and find another one. Well, this process of jumping out, there are a lot of stages in the letting go of one thought world and the jumping into another one. Sometimes they say that there’s this field of light in between thoughts. Well, the light there is obscuring your awareness of what’s actually going on. Sometimes there’s darkness between. That’s obscuring things as well, because it’s in the between times, in the cracks between your thought worlds. That’s where ignorance allows craving and clinging to grow, to give rise to these worlds and latch onto them. So what you’ve got to do is learn how to make your awareness as continuous as possible. It’s like watching a play. I mentioned this this morning. As they move from one scene to another, they bring down the curtain, they change the scenery, then they bring up the curtain. If you watch them changing the scenery, it would destroy the illusion. In the same way, your mind brings down the curtain, then it lifts it up again. You’re someplace else. So what you want to do is part of the curtain. So you can see all the way through the process of leaving one thought and getting into another one. You see how artificial it is, and then you can actually see craving and clinging at work. You see how your ignorance allows yourself to get fooled into these things. Now, for that kind of awareness, you have to have very steady powers of attention, which is what we’re working on right here, right now, giving you a place to step in, making it comfortable so you’d like to stay here, so it’s easy to stay here, so that when you do run into things that are difficult, you have a sense of ease that you can draw on. People often complain about Buddhism, that the Four Noble Truths are so negative, all this stuff about suffering. Well, tucked away in the Fourth Truth, there’s a right concentration, and the factors of right concentration include ease and rapture. So you want to get acquainted enough with the breath so you can see, “Well, where is there ease in the breath?” And what way do you breathe that fills the body and mind with a sense of fullness and refreshment and satisfaction that can turn into rapture? These are important elements in the path so the mind can stay steady and still and watch what’s going on continually without gaps, without lapses. So you’ve got an hour to work with the breath so that you feel comfortable and at home with just being with this process of breathing. When you think about it, it’s pretty strange. If you don’t feel comfortable with your breathing, what are you going to feel comfortable with? It’s the closest thing to your awareness. It’s no wonder. If we don’t feel comfortable here, no wonder the mind keeps jumping around trying to find something else. It always gets pulled back because this immediate dwelling place for the mind is not comfortable. So watch it for a while, work with it for a while, find what ways of adjusting are too heavy-handed, what ways of adjusting are not enough, learn by trial and error. That’s why meditation takes time. But we’ve got a whole hour here. So take this time to get to know your mind, get to know your breath. Give yourself a good place to settle down, because only when the mind has begun to settle down can you really see what’s going on. In particular, you see the problem of where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering and how you can bring a stop to it, how you can abandon those habits that cause suffering and stress. When you’re not causing yourself suffering and stress, no one else is going to barge into your mind to do that to you. All the suffering we have because of things outside is because we pull those things into the mind. So when you’re with the breath consistently enough, with a sense of solidity, you begin to see exactly how this is happening. When you see how it happens, you can see how you can stop.

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