Preparedness

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We often think of the skills that we develop as we meditate as skills for the cushion. You focus on the breath, work with the breath, while you’re sitting with your eyes closed, while you’re sitting in the meditation posture. That’s because it’s the easiest way to get started with these skills, but that’s not where the skills are supposed to stop. After all, we call this practicing. What are you practicing for? You’re practicing so that you can use these skills all the time, because they’re essential all the time. Basic skills for keeping your mind in order, keeping your mind protected, because the mind is subject to all kinds of dangers. The Buddha’s last words were, “Thought constructs are subject to decay and passing away.” So he said, “Achieve a completion through heedfulness.” “Completion,” of course, means completing the task, completing the path. And it’s through heedfulness that we do it. In other words, he’s saying, “Things are dangerous. You can’t even depend on your own thought constructs. They change so easily.” So you have to be heedful to watch out for this. In order to do this, you have to put yourself in a position of strength, a position of safety. That’s what we’re doing as we get the mind with the breath. It gives you something to hold on to in the present moment so you can create a sense of well-being right here, right now, simply by the way you breathe. Notice the way the breath energy flows in the body, which ways the flow feels easy, comfortable, satisfying, which ways it feels constricted, tight, unpleasant. Then you can make adjustments. You find that you can open your awareness to parts of the body that you normally would close off. It creates a great sense of ease, openness, relief. It’s nice to be able to do this from time to time, but it’s even better if you can keep at it, if you can maintain this stance inside. Often we say, “Well, I have too many other things to think about out there.” Well, it’s simply because the mind is used to running around that it feels it has to run around. Actually, you can watch the world from your position within the breath, and it’s a good place to watch it from because you’re in a position, one, of security, two, of clarity. If you can maintain this sense of well-being inside, you find you feel less and less threatened by events outside, things that might happen in the future, things that are actually happening in the present moment. Don’t reach into the mind here in the present moment because you’ve got this safety place, this comfortable place that you can maintain inside. That’s the security. As for the clarity, when the mind is still, it can see things a lot more clearly. It’s creating a lot less noise, so more subtle sounds going on in the mind are easier to detect. Most often our minds are like having buzz saws on all the time. You can hardly hear yourself think when there’s a buzz saw going on. But our minds are so much like that. There’s this thought, that thought, running around here, running there. It’s all a lot of noise. So no wonder things creep up on us. Greed, anger, delusion, all those destructive emotions. They start out small, but because we’ve got this buzz saw going on in our minds, we can’t hear them. Only when they get louder than the buzz saw do we realize what’s happened. By that time, it’s too late. They’ve really taken over. So if you learn how to settle down with the breath, instead of following your thoughts, if a thought arises, just watch it pass, watch it pass, watch it pass. Things get quieter and quieter in the mind because you’re not paying so much attention. You’re not feeding these thoughts with your attention. As the noise level goes down, you begin to detect other noises that you wouldn’t have detected before. You begin to see how things arise in the mind. You’ve got the faint little stirrings in the mind that could lead to greed, could lead to anger, could lead to delusion, if you allow them to grow. But when you catch them when they’re small like this, it’s easy to step on, easy to blow them away. It’s like an oak seedling. When it first comes out of the ground, you could step on it. That’d be the end of it. If you wait until it’s grown into a full-grown tree, you can’t step on it at all. You could step on it, but it wouldn’t kill it. It’s the same with these little inchoate thoughts in the mind. If you catch them in time, they’re not much of a problem. All you have to do is breathe through the little knot of energy that’s associated with them, and they go away. You may not have uprooted them, but at least you’ve cleared a space for yourself. Again, this is a useful skill to have, not only while you’re sitting here trying to keep concentrated for the hour, but as you’re trying to develop a sense of home base in the mind all the time. The less noise you’re creating, not only can you detect subtler things inside your own mind, you can also detect subtler things going on outside as well. You begin to see where the little trigger points are in things that you see and hear and smell and taste and touch. You see the trigger points and you can realize that you can decide not to let things get triggered. You realize you have the choice. But you can see this only when things quiet down and you can maintain that lower noise level as much as possible. So the skill lies not only in getting the mind to settle down, but learning how to keep it here as you get up, as you walk around, as you talk, as you do whatever you need to do in the course of the day. That sense of the breath is there. It’s like having a cushion, like having a little airspace around your mind. It protects you from running off into other things. It protects you from being reactive. Whatever happens, always think, “Go to the breath first,” and then look at the situation from the breath. You’ll find it’s a lot easier to deal with. Many times you see you don’t have to do anything at all, but it’s a good way of cutting through your reactive patterns. The first priority should always go to being with the breath. In the beginning, it stirs things up in the mind to have this kind of priority. Lots of thoughts that demand that they be dealt with first will complain, but if you loyally look at them, you realize that they can’t be nearly as important as your ability to stay right here. They’re just complaining because they’re getting overthrown, but they’re not really as important as they claim to be. What’s really important is the quality of the mind that you develop as you stay with the breath, because it’s not just a sense of ease and comfort. You have to have mindfulness, you have to have alertness, to maintain that sense of ease and comfort. So there’s a sense of solidity, a sense of comfort, a sense of clarity, the ease of your protection. Because destructive emotions can arise at any time at all, and we always seem to be surprised by them. We always seem to be caught off guard, as if we’ve forgotten they could arise. Yet they don’t do it. There’s a potential there all the time. That’s why the Buddha said to be heedful. The best way of being heedful is putting yourself in a position of security so that no matter what happens, whenever, you’re there. You’ve got the tools you need to deal with these things. Because of the sense of ease that comes with the breath, this is work that’s not onerous, it’s not difficult. It’s pleasant work. Because you’re working from this sense of well-being. As you maintain this all the time, that puts you in a position where you’re ready for whatever comes up, so you won’t be caught off guard. So, as the Buddha said, be a little wary of things. Be prepared. You know that your thoughts could change at any moment. The slightest little impulse from outside can set your thoughts running off in all sorts of directions, and that can happen at any time. So you have to be prepared at all times. With the tools that you’ve mastered here on the cushion. It’s like someone learning how to play the piano. In the beginning, you have to go off into a very quiet room where there are very few disturbances, so that you can work on your talent, work on your skill. But once the skill has gotten mastered, then the next steps go to performing in front of small groups. Performing in front of your teacher first, then performing in front of small groups, and then larger and larger groups. Then you can perform anywhere. You give enjoyment to a lot of people that way. It’s the same with the breath. You have to start out by working with it as you sit with your eyes closed, so you can give it all your attention with as few distractions as possible. Once that’s mastered, then you can work on keeping that same center in more difficult situations. When the really difficult situations come up, you’re prepared. You’ve been building up your strength. You’ve got yourself in the right spot, the spot where you can see things coming at you from every direction. You can see them in time. You can be prepared. And you’ve got the strength to deal with whatever comes up. Without the sense of strength that comes from a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, it’s hard to keep up this practice. So learn how to breathe with a sense of fullness. The breath feels full, the body feels full as the breath comes in. As it grows out, you’re not dragging the breath sensations over your body in such a way that creates tension. You’re not squeezing things out as the breath goes out. Think of every little cell in your body being left alone by the breath in such a way that it’s not bothered. The breath comes in, it doesn’t bother anybody. It goes out, it doesn’t bother anybody. It just gives a sense of ease surrounding things. You stick with that for a while. When you have this sense of fullness, that can be the food for the mind. The Pali Canon talks about this. Taking rapture, taking refreshment as your food, nourishes the mind, strengthens the mind, so that the work of being heatful is not difficult. It doesn’t weigh on you. It’s something you can do with a sense of well-being. That gives you the foundation you need to deal with whatever life may bring. Whatever life may throw at you, whenever, wherever, you’re prepared at all times, all places. That’s when the meditation really shows its value.

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