Independence

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We all want happiness. Our problem is that we do a lot of things that don’t create happiness and actually create pain and suffering for ourselves and for the people around us. This is largely because of our own ignorance, particularly ignorance of our minds. So many things go on in the mind that we’re not really fully aware of. We act on intentions that we don’t entirely understand. Things come popping up in the mind and it’s hard to see whether they’re worth following or not. This is why we have to meditate, to give ourselves a vantage point, a place where we can stand and look to see what’s coming up in the mind and decide whether we want to go with it. These thoughts that come up in the mind are like cars driving up in front of us. The driver opens the door and beckons us and says, “Come in.” And oftentimes we don’t even think about it. We just jump right in and go. We don’t ask, “Where are they going? Who are you?” We just jump right in and go. And then the car morphs into something else, and the driver morphs into something else, and we find ourselves going all over the place and yet totally losing track of where we’ve been. You’ve probably done that thought experiment of stopping and asking yourself, “Where have my thoughts been for the past five minutes?” Try to trace from one thought to another. How did you get where you are? If you try to sketch it out, it’s like those little particles in water. They’re bumped around by the water molecules, a zigzag line all over the place. That’s our train of thought. It doesn’t even really deserve to be called a train, because trains actually go someplace. They know where they’re going. They know where they’ve been. It’s more like the staggering of our thoughts. You stagger here, you stagger there. In the midst of this staggering around, you have to make decisions about what you’re going to do, what you’re going to say, what you’re going to think. Because we’re staggering and leaning all over the place, it’s hard to get a really good sense of what’s the right thing or what’s the most skillful thing to do. So this is why we meditate. You want to focus on something that’s outside of the mind but very close to the mind, and that’s the breath. You want to be outside so you can have a vantage point from which to watch your thoughts. Otherwise, if you’re staying with one thought and trying to watch another thought, it’s like being on a train in a train station. You see other trains lined up, and you look out the windows of your train and something’s moving, but you’re not sure whether you’re aware of it. You’re moving, or the other train is moving. But if you’re standing on the ground, you can tell who’s moving and who’s not, because you’re still, and you’re outside the trains. So you want to focus on the breath. The breath is convenient because it’s about the closest thing you can focus on to the mind. It’s always there with you. And actually, the reason you’re able to sense your body is through the breath. If the breath stopped, you wouldn’t have any sensation of the body at all. The breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole energy of breathing, which exists on many levels in the body. The most blatant is the level that brings the air in and out of the lungs, that energy flow. But there’s also the energy flow that goes through the blood vessels. It goes through the nerves. Then, as the meditation progresses, you get sensitive to that as well. In the beginning, you want to focus on the breath. It’s easy to see. So you focus on the sensation of breathing in, breathing out. You can focus on any one spot in the body—the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, the base of the throat, any place where you can clearly see, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” It feels comfortable at that spot. It’s not tight, it’s not tense. You feel relaxed at that spot. And you allow the breath to feel comfortable. You can change the rhythm in any way that feels good. Once it feels good, think of it spreading out. So it’s not just one spot that feels comfortable, but the whole area around it is filled with as much comfortable energy as you can. As you can muster. And then the trick is to stay there. This requires mindfulness, it requires alertness. Mindfulness is just to keep in mind the fact that you’re here to be with the breath. There’s nothing else you’re responsible for right now. Nothing else you have to think about, nothing else you have to plan. Just be with the breathing. Keep reminding yourself of that, because it’s so easy for the mind to say to itself, “Well, now that we’ve got this whole hour, let’s think about this.” And then you go off into whatever past, future, which is a waste of the hour. Maybe not a total waste, but you certainly don’t get as much out of it as you would if you really tried to be mindful to be with the breath. Then you try to be alert, noticing how the breath feels. If the breath is not comfortable, you’re not going to want to stay with it. Try adjusting it in different ways so it feels really good breathing in, really good breathing out. After all, this is the energy of life. If this doesn’t feel good, the body’s not going to be healthy, the mind’s not going to be happy. So try to be sensitive to what feels really good. Which parts of the body really sense it for the breathing? Usually the area around the middle of the chest. The chest tends to be quite sensitive. Try to get a sense of what breathing in feels good there, what breathing out feels good there, and then just stay with it. Don’t be in a hurry to go someplace else, because you want to be really solidly established here before you start looking back into the mind, what’s going on in the mind. Once you are established, then you see lots of interesting things. Some of the things seem pretty discouraging. There’s a lot more greed, anger, and delusion going on in your mind than you might normally like to think. But the fact that you’re seeing it is a step in the right direction, because so many times we live in those thoughts, or we drive around in those thoughts, to continue the old analogy. We get driven around in those thoughts. And we don’t even know what kind of thoughts they are. It’s like driving down the road in a Hummer, not realizing that you’re guzzling up a lot of gas. What you want to do is be able to step back and look at the thoughts, which is what the breath is good for. It gives you your vantage point. And you begin to see how greed, anger, and delusion move around in the mind, how they force you to do things that you really don’t want to do. And you realize that you don’t have to follow through with them. Many times a thought pops into the mind and we think, “Well, it’s my thought. I’ve got to go with it.” But when you can step back like this, you realize you have a choice. And as you get more and more sensitive, you see the thought earlier and earlier in its process of development, and you get a sense immediately whether the thought’s going to go in a direction you want to follow or not. That puts you in a real position of control. You’re in charge. And you learn how to deal with the thought. You learn other skills as well. Many times you hear that desire is a bad thing. But you begin to realize there are skillful and unskillful desires. You can use your desire, the power of desire, directed in a skillful way. As the Buddha pointed out, the desire for awakening, the desire for discernment, that’s a good desire. You want to follow through with it. Even things like pride have their use. A lot of meditators have been motivated by the fact that someone else has looked down on them. And they say to themselves, “I’ll show them.” And they actually get to work more diligently with their meditation. I know this worked for me when I was in Thailand. Over here, Thai people say, “What would a Western know about the Dharma? What could a Western actually do?” You hear many stories about how people over there really look up to Western monks. But there’s also a contingent that look at Western monks kind of like performing elephants. Just the fact that they can speak Thai is amazing. Or they can go through the motions of what monks are supposed to do. That’s considered amazing right there. When you think about it, it’s kind of a subtle insult. They don’t have the inner potential for anything deeper. Occasionally I’d get stung in that direction. I’d go up and meditate. I was going to show them. Of course, eventually you have to let go of that particular thought, but the fact that it gets you on the meditation cushion and gets you meditating can be a useful thing. What this means is that you start learning to use even what might ordinarily look like a defilement. But you can use it for whatever good it has, and then you can drop it. That’s the advantage that comes when you’re able to stay with the breath like this and watch your thoughts. It’s a thought that’s potentially dangerous. You can see what good it has to offer, take that good, and then just let it go. This is an important skill in the meditation because it teaches you, one, to be a lot more honest with yourself about what you’re thinking. If you think desire or conceit or things like that are bad, then you try to block them out of your mind and pretend that they’re not there. But when you get more and more solidly established with the breath, you can actually look into them and see what good they have to offer and where their drawbacks are. Take the good and leave the rest behind. It’s like someone who knows how to eat a fish. You take the meat, but you don’t take the bones. These are some of the advantages that come from being able to stay with the breath and being able to step outside of your thoughts, outside of the worlds of your thinking. So you can choose which thoughts you want to follow. In this way, you’re a lot clearer about where you are. You’re not constantly leaning over or stangering around. When the mind is straight up and down like this, then you get a clear sense of what’s going left, what’s going right, what’s skillful, what’s not, what’s going to lead to long-term happiness, what’s not going to lead to long-term happiness, what’s going to lead to long-term suffering. You see these things a lot more clearly. As a result, you get more and more skillful in how you live. That desire you have for true happiness becomes more and more realizable. You see it in your daily life. The decisions you make cause less and less harm. You’ve got yourself in a position where you can see what really will be harmful and what won’t. And you’ve got the strength to make the right choice.

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