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One of the most important skills you can develop as a meditator is catching the mind in the act. To begin with, it’s catching in the act of wandering off. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. You stay for a couple of breaths and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. The frustration is that you’ve missed it, you got hoodwinked. Our attitude towards these distractions is almost often like that of flies and mosquitoes and gnats that are buzzing around us. You like to swat them and get them out of the way so you can really do your meditation. But catching the mind as it’s about to go off, that’s a very important part of the meditation. So don’t regard it simply as a nuisance. It’s a way of developing mindfulness and alertness, the two most basic qualities that the Buddha said are the most helpful qualities in any task. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, and alertness means watching what you’re actually doing. Then you want to keep the two of them together. Keeping things in mind to begin with means simply just keeping the breath in mind. Then you try to be alert to the breath. The more alert you are to the breath, the easier it is to keep it in mind. The more you start paying attention, the more you start getting interested in this energy flow in the body, you find you get more and more engrossed and you’re less likely to wander off. But it’ll still happen every now and then. Ideally, you want to catch yourself in the act before the mind really goes someplace. In some meditation methods, I’ll have you note distraction or wandering or whatever and coming right back. It’s a useful tool sometimes, but sometimes you don’t need that. Just catch it and bring it back. The important thing is that you try to see it as an event in the mind rather than getting sucked into that little world that the mind creates. It’s like walking through a room and seeing a TV show on. It’s so easy to sit down and get sucked into the tube. But in this case, you want to walk past and see, “Oh, that’s a TV show,” and know what happens to people that sit around watching TV all the time. Their brains get sucked out. You don’t want to do that, so you walk through the room and don’t get involved. You want to have the same attitude towards the distracting thoughts. Try to see them as events. See how they form. It’s usually just a little stirring there in the mind. Then at some point, you apply a perception, you apply a label to it. This is this, and that’s that. It’s like you have a little code for yourself. You recognize the little code signals, and many times you create the code signals. It’s just a stirring, nothing much at all, and then you turn it into a thought about this, that, the other thing, and then you go with it. You get sucked into that world. You want to catch yourself before you get sucked in. You want to catch yourself in that act of labeling, saying, “This is a thought about the past, this is a thought about the future, whatever,” and leave it simply as a process and get back to where you belong, which is with the breath. In this way, you’re beginning to develop the basic attitude behind the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths is basically seeing things as processes. There’s cause and effect. One thing leads to the next, and some things lead to stress, and other things lead to the end of stress. You see the distracting thought as something leading to stress. As long as you stay in that mode of watching it as a chain of cause and effect, you’re looking at it in terms of the Four Noble Truths. That cuts through ignorance. This is what keeps that little stirring in the mind, that little sankhara or fabrication, from turning into something that’s going to suck you in. This is how we overcome ignorance. It’s learning how to see things as cause and effect. The simple process of learning how to catch yourself before you get distracted is very important. John Lee makes the point that mindfulness and alertness, as they get more and more developed, because they get stronger, they turn into something called jnanadasana, which means knowledge and vision. In other words, you see things as they actually happen in the mind, and you understand what’s going on. This is how discernment develops. And this is how discernment becomes the kind of discernment that can liberate you. Because you want to see fear happening, or you want to see anger happening. You want to see it while it’s actually happening. You don’t want to go through instant replays because your video machine has its defects. It’s not nearly as effective seeing it again the third or fourth or fifth time, trying to recreate what happened, as it is if you actually see it happening. You see the mind makes choices. It goes with a particular thought. And when you can see the stress that happens in realizing that it’s not necessary, then you let it go. But you’ve got to catch it in the act. When this thought is caught in the act, then you can see through it. As you catch it in the act of causing stress, then you can let it go. You begin to see how foolish you are to follow a lot of these thoughts. There’s an energy. This is one of the meanings of that word asava. It flows out of the mind. It’s almost a physical sensation sometimes. There’s something flowing out from your awareness of the body. It’s going to go outside. Instead of following it out, instead of flowing after it, you stay right here and watch it move. You’ll see it goes out of the way and then just disappears. That’s because you didn’t give it that extra impetus. Then those thoughts have a lot less power over the mind, because you see the way in which they’re fabricated. You see the element of choice. In some cases, you realize, “Why would I ever choose to do that?” That’s because you kept it hidden from yourself. So these two very basic qualities, mindfulness and alertness, carry you through all the way. And this skill that you develop in learning to deal with distraction, that becomes important as well. As you catch even more and more refined levels of stress, even in very strong levels of concentration, there’ll still be a little level of stress, a little bit of activity. It’s very easy when you hit strong levels of concentration not to see it. Everything seems smooth and silent and totally still. But that’s because your mindfulness and alertness are not yet ripe. Stay there for a while. As things begin to settle down and you get more and more sensitive and subtle, you’ll see these little subtle movements in the act. That’s when you can drop them, and that’s when new things happen in the mind. So try to keep your alertness as quick as possible, and keep your frame of reference as solidly as possible with the breath, with the thought in the back of your mind also, that if anything else comes up, try to see it as a process, see it as a series of events, a chain of causes and effects, rather than believing that it’s another world or a thought world that really gives you a representation of reality or that it’s going to be entertaining. Don’t get sucked into it. Don’t walk through the room and sit down and watch the TV. Just see it as ghost images on the screen and leave it at that. At some point, you’ll understand why you feel compelled to sit down and watch it. When you see through that, then you’ve seen through a lot. You’ve cut through a lot of the ignorance that causes the mind’s habit of fabrication to lead to stress and suffering. Because you catch these things in the act.

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