Remarkable Qualities

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The object of our meditation is something pretty unremarkable, just the breath coming in and going out. It’s been with you ever since the day you were born. And most oftentimes it gets shoved off into the background. Lots of other things you want to think about, look at, listen to. And if the breath gets in the way, you just block it out. What’s going to make it remarkable is what you bring to it in terms of the qualities of mind that you apply to the meditation. It’s like the seed of a redwood tree. The seeds are awfully small and in and of themselves nothing very remarkable. But if they happen to fall in the right place on the forest floor, get the right conditions, they can grow into huge trees and last for a long time. And so it is with the breath. If you bring the right qualities of mind to it, it’s going to turn into something remarkable, a real home for the mind, something you can really depend on. It’s going to carry you through all kinds of difficulties. The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means “to develop.” And it’s in developing the qualities of mind that we bring to the breath. The breath is going to develop as well. This is how the mind develops. It’s like exercising your body. If you want to be strong, you don’t have to wait around until you get a strong body. You take whatever strength you have and you use it. And that’s what strengthens the body. In the same way, you take certain qualities of mind that you already have and you use them, you apply them to the breath. This is how they develop. This is how they grow. The first quality you want to bring is desire, the desire to do the meditation. This has to be built on, one, seeing the drawbacks of not doing the meditation and, two, seeing the advantages of doing it. The drawbacks are all around us. We look at what a mess the world is in because of human greed, anger, and delusion. And we realize that that greed, anger, and delusion is not only out there in other people; it’s in our own minds. All you have to do is look at your life and see the times when these things have taken over and ruined lots of potentially good situations. And as long as the seeds of these things are still in the mind, you can’t be really secure about the future. As for the advantages of the meditation, those are many as well. They’re harder to see because there are not that many people out there who really have been meditating and gotten good results. So the examples are not all around us, but the examples are there. And you can think about it briefly and think of what it would be like if your mind were stronger in terms of mindfulness and alertness. Because these are the qualities that help you in any situation. If you were to do your work with more mindfulness and more alertness, whatever the job, it would come out a lot better. The results would be a lot more worthwhile. So here’s an opportunity to develop those skills. And when you find the times when you can catch yourself in the midst of giving in to greed, aversion, and delusion, and can stop yourself, you see what a valuable skill that is. And when you think about the fact that aging, illness, and death are going to come, and as the chant just said, the world offers no shelter. There may be doctors to help with illness, but they can only help you so much. And the question is, what are you going to do with the times when the doctors can’t help you? What strengths will you have to draw on? Well, here’s a chance to develop those strengths. So once you see that this is a worthwhile activity, then the next step is to be persistent. Just really stick with it. Stay with the breath every time it comes in, every time it goes out. If you find yourself winding off, just bring yourself right back. Don’t let yourself get discouraged. The longer you can stay with the breath, the more continuous your awareness is, the more those good qualities of the mind get developed. And the more you’re going to be able to see about what’s going on in the mind. This is where the next quality comes in, and that’s intentness. Just really focus all your attention on this. How much have you observed your breath in the past? What do you know about the breath, aside from the fact that it comes in and goes out? Actually, there are lots of variations to the breath. In long, out short. In short, out long. In long, in and out. Short, in and out. Heavy, light, shallow, deep, fast, slow. Try to explore the variations of the breath and see what feels good for the body right now. And be very, very sensitive to what feels good. The more you allow yourself to be sensitive here, the more absorbing the breath becomes. And this leads to the next quality, which is circumspection. Keep close tabs on what you’re doing and on the results that you’re getting. And if they’re not what you want, well, you can change. Use your ingenuity to think of different ways of breathing, different ways of focusing, principles in the seven basic steps in the John Lee’s Guide to Meditation. They’re very broad principles, and they allow a lot of variation. There’s nothing to say that you have to breathe in a particular way. You’re encouraged to figure out what kind of breathing feels good right now, what kind of breathing do you like right now. Give yourself that kind of breath and then see if it really is what you want. If it’s not, then you can change again. The whole purpose of this is to improve your powers of perception, your powers of judgment, your powers of evaluation. Ultimately, you want to turn them onto the mind to evaluate what’s going on in the mind. The mind is a lot more subtle than the breath, so first you practice them with the mind. Then you exercise them with the breath. Get so that you’re really a connoisseur of your breathing. Here it is, something that’s free, that hasn’t been privatized yet. Nobody’s going to take your breath away and then try to sell it back to you. You’ve got it right here. Here’s an opportunity to develop this resource inside that you’re going to use in all kinds of ways. You’ll find that when you’re tired, if you’ve really been observant about your breathing, you know ways to breathe that will give you more energy. If you’re feeling tense, you will have found ways of breathing to relax. When you’re feeling hot or cold, you have ways of breathing to make you feel more comfortable. When you’re angry, there are ways to breathe that get rid of that sense that you’ve just got to get the anger out of your system. Instead of bottling it up or letting it all out, you can just breathe in a way that feels relaxed all the way down to your fingertips, all the way down to your toes. The sense of feeling stifled by the anger will go away, and then you can actually look at the anger as an event in the mind. Without all the physical symptoms getting in the way, there are lots of useful skills that are connected with the breath. The breath can do all kinds of things for you, aside from just keeping you alive by going in and out. If you really pay it close attention, you’ll find that it really is something remarkable, this energy flow we have in the body. It all depends on bringing the right qualities, the desire to learn about the breath, persistence in just sticking with it, and using your intentness and your powers of ingenuity and circumspection to bring these qualities to the breathing. The breath will develop into something remarkable. The mind will begin to develop into something remarkable as well. It’s all a matter of what you give to the practice. We all come to the meditation hoping to get something out of it, but one of the main lessons we have to learn is that you’re not going to get anything out of it unless you start giving a lot into it. The things you give into it are qualities you already have to some extent. It’s simply a matter of putting them to use, exercising them here with the breath, so that they become strong. These qualities of mind that at the beginning may not seem especially remarkable themselves will become remarkable. They will become remarkable to the point where you learn how to depend on them to deal with all the big life and death matters that you’re going to face.

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