Engaging the Whole Mind

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When you meditate, you have to pay attention to two things. One is where you’re going to focus your attention. And here we focus on the breath. The breath comes in. Know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know that it’s going out. Focus on the breath. Focus wherever you have a sense of the process of breathing. It may not necessarily be the air coming in and out of the nose. It may be the movement of the chest, the movement of the abdomen, or just the general sense of energy flow in the body. Wherever you have a clear sensation that now the breath is coming in, or now that you’re breathing in, and now that you’re breathing out, focus right there. Any thoughts that don’t have any relationship to this, you can just let go. Just be with the sensation in and of itself. That’s where you focus your attention. The second issue you have to pay attention to is the qualities of mind that you bring to this. Actually, there are lots of qualities. If you had to think about all of them, it might clutter up the meditation. But it’s good to keep a few of them in mind. One list of the qualities they call the basis for success, what helps you to succeed at the meditation. There are four. The first one is simply wanting to do it, having the motivation, having a sense that this is a good use of your time. There’s something you want to learn from the meditation, something you want to gain from the meditation. Sometimes you’re told you shouldn’t come to the meditation with a gaining idea, but if you don’t have any sense of what you’re going to get out of it, you’re not going to want to do it. After all, it takes effort. At the very least, you should realize this is a way of developing a good, strong, reliable sense of happiness in the mind, a sense of well-being that doesn’t have to depend on anything outside. That’s something worth pursuing, because if your happiness depends on things outside it’s going to fall down every time the wind blows, every time the wind changes direction. There it goes. And then you have to jerry-rig up some other way of trying to find happiness, and that gets blown over. So when you come to meditate, you’re looking for something that’s solid, that’s independent of outside conditions, and ultimately even independent of thoughts going through your mind. Once you have the desire to do this, then the next step is persistence. To be persistent, you have to apply mindfulness and alertness as well. In other words, you have to keep what you’re doing here in mind, keep the breath in mind, and be alert to how the breath is going, and be alert to the mind when it wanders off, because persistence means that you stick with it. It’s not something you do for a little while and then you let your thoughts wander off and sniff the flowers here and there. You look at the birds there and do a little window shopping over there. As soon as you sense the mind wandering off the breath, you bring it right back. This ties in with another quality, which is called intentness, that you really pay full attention to what you’re doing. In this world of multitasking, this is not something you want to just add to your list of multitasks. We’re monotasking here. Just one thing—the breath. The more you pay full attention to it, the more you’re going to see. This is where an important part of the instructions is that once you get a sense of the breath coming in and going out, you try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, because that helps to engage all of your awareness. 360 degrees all around. There’s a sensation of comfortable breathing. Allow that to fill the body, too. So you’ve got the desire to be aware, you’ve got the persistence, you’ve got the intent, and then the fourth quality is discrimination, in the good sense of the word. In other words, you look at the results of what you’re doing, and if things don’t seem to be going right, you try to figure out what’s not working. Discrimination here involves ingenuity as well. Maybe the breath is too long, maybe it’s too short, maybe it’s too light, too heavy. You can make changes. Experiment. See what works, because you’re responsible for the results. It’s not simply a mechanical process that you’re putting the mind through, where you do the steps and without any observing on your part, somehow the mind is going to come out awakened. This is not a meat grinder. It’s not an assembly line. It’s a skill, and as with all skills, it requires that you have a sense of what works and what doesn’t. You try to figure out, if it’s not working, what can you do to make it go better? In other words, for discernment to arise, you have to engage all of the powers of the mind. So it’s not just a matter of technique. The technique is there. It’s there to give you something to work with. In the course of working with it, you’re going to have to engage the whole mind. And as you’re engaged in the whole mind, that’s how you get to know the whole mind. You have to take responsibility for what’s happening. It’s a quality of integrity that underlies all of this. The mind doesn’t settle down. You have to figure out, what are you doing? What are you doing wrong? Be cheerful enough to admit when you’ve done wrong. A lot of people don’t like the idea of right and wrong. Sometimes they come to the Dharma thinking, “Well, you can get beyond right and wrong just by willing yourself to transcend them.” Well, you don’t get beyond them that way. You get beyond right and wrong by figuring out what’s right and what’s wrong, and then dropping what’s wrong, working with what’s right until it’s completed the job. Then you can let go of that. Until you’ve completed the job, you have to be very much concerned with what’s right and wrong, what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. That requires a great deal of honesty on your part. So when you’re giving your mind to it in that quality of intentness, that’s something you have to give as well. You really honestly look at what’s going on, and then you do your best to figure out how to make it go better, how to get the mind to settle down more skillfully, more quickly, more solidly. It’s all there in the seven steps that Ajahn Lee talked about. It’s simply a matter of mastering those steps with more and more finesse. In other words, you focus the mind and the breath, and you bring the whole mind to bear on what’s happening, particularly on the issue of what you’re doing that’s causing stress. What can you do to stop causing that stress? Give all your attention to that question. Things are bound to develop, and meditation is bound to succeed. you

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