Giving Ballast to the Mind

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One of the Buddha’s many talents as a teacher was his ability to find apt similes for things. You look through the Pali Canon, and there are all kinds of similes. From the skills of soldiers, the skills of cooks, similes drawn from plants, from animals, and they’re all very apt. But he said at one point, “There’s one thing that’s really hard to find a simile for, and that’s the quickness with which an untrained mind can change.” Here it is, the main factor in our lives, the factor that shapes our thoughts, our words, and deeds, and through our thoughts and words and deeds shapes the pleasures and pains we experience. And yet it can turn on us in an instant. It can turn from peaceful to enraged or inflamed with lust. Things you used to believe, suddenly you drop. Standards that you used to hold by, you abandon them. And it all can happen very quickly. So this is one of the big problems in our lives. We can’t really trust our own minds, especially when we’re put into difficulties. We may be good, upright, moral people, but all of a sudden poverty hits, war hits, and we can turn into animals. So to find some sort of happiness that’s solid and dependable, we have to turn our minds into something solid and dependable. Then we have principles, we have values that we really hold by, no matter what. This is where we have to train the mind. Because when it’s really well trained, then you can depend on it. So you have to find something to give the mind ballast. Not for the purpose of burdening it, but just to make sure that it doesn’t fly away fast. Because the mind is so finicky, you’ve got to give it something it likes so that it doesn’t resist the training. This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because the breath is something you can adjust, you can change it to make it comfortable. The breath has an influence on the whole body. The way you breathe is going to have an influence on the way you experience your head, your shoulders, your arms, your legs, your back, your abdomen. All the parts of the body are affected by the way you breathe. If you can make the body comfortable, as the Buddha said, develop a sense of ease and rapture that you can then permeate and spread to fill the whole body. Then it’s a lot easier for the mind to stay still. When it’s in a position where it can stay still, you can begin to trust it a little bit more. So focus on the sensation of the breathing. Where do you feel the breathing right now? Put aside your preconceived notions of where the air comes in and out of the nostrils. Just ask yourself this process of breathing, the expansion and contraction of the muscles, of the rib cage, the diaphragm, and then indirectly from those to other parts of the body. Where do you really feel it? Where does the breath seem to begin, the impulse to have a new breath? Where does it begin? Is it comfortable? Does it feel tight and constricted? If it does, you can try to think of it being ventilated a little bit more. Wherever there seems to be a shield or shell around the body, think of it dissolving so the breath can come in and out of the body from any direction. And it feels refreshing. It feels nourishing. Then when it gets tired of a particular rhythm of breathing, you can change. Keep this up. What does the body want right now? What would feel good right now? Of course, the body doesn’t really want anything. It’s the mind. What would feel good to the mind right now? Which part of the body would you like to satisfy with a comfortable breath? Go through the body, section by section. Become sensitive to what that particular part of the body needs in terms of breath energy coming in and going out. How do you bring it in so it feels good and gratifying? How do you let go out so you don’t feel like you’re squeezing it or constricting it? Think of all the little muscles in your blood vessels relaxing. Then let the breath come into this relaxed body and if it’s going to go out, it can go out on its own. We don’t have to squeeze it out. Focus on the parts of the body you can make comfortable. There are going to be pains in some parts of the body. There may be pains in your legs, pains in your back, but you don’t have to focus on them. Focus on the comfortable parts and do your best to stick with them. The more continuous your gaze, the more refined the sense of pleasure, the more gratifying the sense of pleasure. Any part of the body that feels gratified, think of that very pleasant feeling spreading wherever it can go in the body, like mercury. It can slip in and around all kinds of places. In other words, do your best to make the breath really absorbing. Here it is, this energy flow in the body that’s been keeping us alive ever since we were born. Here’s our opportunity to really get to know it and to maximize its potential for pleasure. Make it as continuous as possible. The more continuous the sense of pleasure in the body, the easier it is going to be to stay focused continually. The mind is going to be less and less inclined to want to change. This is teaching it the habit that it needs. In order to be reliable, you have to stick with something. Train the mind to be continuous in its gaze, continuous in its attention, continuous in its focus, so that if it’s going to move, you’re going to stay focused. Then know the fact that it’s moving. All too often, the mind moves in such a way that we can’t keep track of it. We seem to be with the breath, then all of a sudden we find ourselves someplace else, over in Alaska, over in Africa, Europe, out to Mars, down with the penguins in Antarctica. We can go all kinds of places very quickly, so quickly that, as the Buddha said, there’s no easy simile for it. But when you get it trained, you see it happening because your attention gets quicker, your mindfulness, your alertness become quicker, you catch the mind in the act, and you can bring it back. This is how you learn how to trust the mind. You get quicker than it is. In other words, the skillful qualities of attention and mindfulness get quicker than the fabrications of the mind. That way, you can begin to have some control over it. This is what it means to train the mind. It can’t pull any fast ones on you. And when it can’t pull any fast ones on you, that’s when you can begin to trust it. So be as alert as you can to whatever’s going on in the body and how the mind reacts to that. Learn how to get the body and the mind both in permeable states where they can stay together. They get absorbed into each other. So that your mindfulness is immersed in the body, and the body is saturated with your awareness. This is what gives the mind palace. It gives it an anchor here in the present moment. Again, it’s not a sense of weightiness that’s burdensome. It gives it heft. It gives it solidity. When it goes, it lets you know. When it comes back, it lets you know. This is an important step in getting the mind into a position where you can really trust it. When you can trust the mind, that takes care of all the real dangers in life. If your life is trustworthy, then you can have some sense of confidence that you’ve got a happiness you can depend on.

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