June 8, 2024

Focus on your breath. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out. Notice where you feel the breath, the sensation that lets you know that now the breath is coming in, the sensations that let you know that now the breath is going out. Give all your attention to those sensations. Notice whether they’re comfortable or not. If they’re not, you can change them. You can change the rate of the breath. You can breathe shorter or longer, faster or slower, deeper or more shallow. You can change the texture of the breath. You can make it heavy or light. Try to become sensitive to what feels best for the body, what feels best for the mind right now. As for other thoughts that might come through the mind, you can let them go. Try to stay in the world of the body right here. The mind is used to living in lots of different worlds. We’ve got the world of the family, the world at work, the world of school, the world of the highway, the world of being a shopper. We live in different worlds, and in each of those worlds we play a different role. The mind is very quick to change worlds, to change its frames of reference, and then to change the role that it plays within those frames of reference. But if you notice that as we change, there’s a moment of blacking out. It’s like when they change the sets in a play. They have to pull the curtain down. Then they change all the furniture, change the backdrop, and then they pull the curtain up in your whole new world. If you watch them changing the sets, it would destroy the illusion. So there has to be a moment of invisibility. It’s the same with the mind. When you change from one world to the next, there is that moment of blacking out. This is one of the things you’ll notice as you meditate. You black out for a minute and suddenly find yourself in another world. After a while, you realize, “I’m not supposed to be here. I’m supposed to be with the breath.” So you come back. What you want to try to do is fight that tendency to black out. There will be a point where the mind actually chooses. It gets bored with the breath, or something else comes up, and you’re interested and want to find out, “What’s this going on over here?” You black out for a minute, and then you’re in that other world. It’s that lapse of mindfulness. It contains all kinds of machinations of the mind, all the changing of the sets and the changing of the backdrop, so that you can actually create that other world. So you want to look for that moment of blacking out. The way you do this is try to fight the tendency to change the frame of reference that you’re operating under. Right here, the frame of reference is the sensation of the body, the sensations of warmth and motion and coolness and heaviness. Everything that gives you a sense that you’re inhabiting a body that has a shape. Whatever the sensations are that let you know that you have arms and hands and legs and a torso and a head, feet. Try to focus as much attention as possible on the sensations and keep your attention continuous. You’ll begin to see that little tendency to move off. As you learn to look for it, you can learn to say no to it. As you learn to say no to it, you start learning lots of important lessons about the mind. This is why concentration is the central factor of the Buddhist path, the ability to stay with one topic for long periods of time. It’s not to dull you out. The purpose is to get you to see the tendency of the mind that doesn’t want to stay with that one topic. Why would it stay? You’re giving it something perfectly good to stay with. The breath coming in, the breath going out. This is the energy of life. And you learn how to make it comfortable. So it should feel good to stay here. Yet even then, the mind wants to slip off. Why is that? If you want to understand the mind, this is where you look. Make things as still as possible, and then look for any lack of stillness that may come up. One of the ways of keeping it with the object, keeping it with the breath, is to try to get interested in it. Remember, there’s more to the breath than just in and out. There are many different levels of breath sensation in the body. There’s the level of sensations that correspond with the in-and-out breath, and then there are the other motion sensations in the body as well. If you look carefully, you can gain a sense of where your blood vessels are tensed up and where they’re not tense, where they’re more relaxed, where the blood is flowing well and where the blood is not flowing well. Once you get a sense of where there’s tension and where there’s relaxation, you can play with it. Focus on your hands. Try to relax your hands as much as possible. All the little joints, the fingers, the muscles of the palms, the muscles along the back of the hands, the muscles in your wrists, up the forearm. And then just try to keep them as relaxed as possible. See what that does to the sense of energy in the body. You can try the same with your feet, starting with the toes and coming up through the feet, through the ankles. Then just try to maintain that sense of relaxation all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Try to catch where it is that there’s tension building up, say, with the in-breath, or a sense of pushing out with the out-breath. Then see if you can breathe without that tension or without that pushing. Then how it affects your sense of inhabiting the body. There’s lots to explore here. Stay in the world of the body as long as you can. This helps keep you grounded. If you fully inhabit the body, it’s very hard to slip off to past or future. This is why, as John Lee said, the state when the awareness fills the body and the breath gets more and more subtle until it seems to be perfectly still. That’s your foundation in concentration practice. That’s the foundation of insight. Because you’ve got something to keep you grounded. If you get into more formless types of concentration, it’s very easy to slither and slip around. Because all you have is the perception, say, of space, or knowing, to keep you in place. But if you’ve got the body here and you’re fully inhabiting the body, you’ve got your grounding and the ability to stay with the body, to fully inhabit the body, as long as possible. It teaches you lots of lessons about the movements of the mind. It teaches you the motivations for the movements. Why does the mind want to move off? What do you have to do in order to keep it interested? At what point don’t you have to? Can you let go of the adjustment of the breath and just be with the body? When the mind wants to move, why does it want to move? You don’t have to give in to that impulse to go on to the next thing or the next thing. You can just stay right here and see what you learn about the mind as you resist that impulse to move on, move on. This is why concentration is the basis for insight. When your gaze gets steady, you can see things more clearly, little tiny movements that you would miss otherwise. When we practice meditation, it’s not a process of dulling the mind. It’s simply putting the mind in a position where we can really see things a lot more clearly. The Buddha himself didn’t make any distinction between tranquility practice or insight practice. You practice concentration and you develop both qualities. The mind gets more tranquil, more still, and you begin to see things you didn’t see before. They go together. So the part you can will is the part where you just will yourself to stay, stay, stay with this world of the body, not see it. It doesn’t slip off to other worlds, other frames of reference. The actual insight you’re going to get, you can’t will. You can will yourself to ask questions, but the actual answers aren’t things you can’t will. If you can will the answer, it’s pretty sure that you’ve picked up an answer from someplace else and you’re trying to force it on the situation. The real answers are the ones that you see, and many times they’re unexpected. So the work of the meditation lies in establishing a comfortable foundation for the mind, a comfortable frame of reference that you can maintain. Just keep going in all kinds of situations. You work here as you’re sitting with your eyes closed for the minimum of distractions. But you also want to be able to maintain that same frame of reference as you go out and deal with other people, as you do chores around the monastery, as you walk and talk and sit and lie down, stand. Whatever your activities, the more continuous your frame of reference, the more you see. So work on the part that you can will, and the things that you can’t will will start appearing.

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