A Thread Out of the Maze

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There’s a question the Buddha has you ask yourself every day. Days and nights fly past, fly past. “What am I doing right now?” The reason he wants you to ask yourself this question is to keep reminding yourself that what you’re doing is really important. What you’re doing makes all the difference in the world. So, what are you doing right now? Try focusing on your breath. See how the breathing feels. Notice where you can see the breath clearly. And then stay there for a while. It might be the tip of the nose, it might be the rising and falling of the chest, the rising and falling of the abdomen, or, on a more subtle level, the movement of energy through the body as you breathe in, the movement of energy as you breathe out. And then notice to see if it’s comfortable. If it’s not, you can change. Make the breath deeper, more shallow, faster, slower, longer, shorter, heavier, lighter. You don’t have to force it to change in these ways. Just think and see. It’s amazing how just the power of thought can change the way you breathe, simply reminding the body that it can breathe in a different way. It doesn’t have to breathe in ways that are uncomfortable. This is one freedom that they’ll never take away from you, the freedom to breathe in a comfortable way. And for most of us, we don’t take advantage of it. So here’s an opportunity to develop a sense of ease, a sense of well-being inside. That’s immediate. It doesn’t have to depend on anybody else. All it has to depend on is your powers of observation, your mindfulness, your alertness, your powers of concentration, and the subtlety of your discernment. Why is this important? Well, the choices we make in life depend on how we feel in the present moment. You could even think of this as a selfish indulgence, sitting here breathing in a comfortable way while the rest of the world is suffering. But remember, all the things that you do and say and think come out of how you feel in the present moment. The cruelties that people do to one another in the world come from the fact that they feel threatened or ill at ease. Kindness to others has to come from learning how to be kind to yourself. Because when you have a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, when the breath gets really comfortable and you think of it permeating the entire body, a sense of ease permeating the entire body, a sense of rapture suffusing everything from the top of the head down to the tips of the fingers and the tips of the toes, when you have that sense of well-being, and it’s attainable simply by the way you look at the breath, why would you want to harm anyone? Why would you want to say anything that you would later regret? Why would you want to do anything that you would later regret? The things we do and say and think that harm ourselves and harm others because we don’t know how to take care of ourselves in the present moment. So here’s a chance to take care of yourself. Look after yourself. Try to get more and more sensitive to how the movement of your mind affects the way you breathe and how that affects the sense of well-being or dis-ease that you carry around in the body. As you focus on this issue, you begin to see more clearly the power of your intentions, the power of your actions in the present moment. You can choose to take advantage of this potential for well-being in the body, or you can choose not to. You’ve got that power of choice. And for most of us, we haven’t been exercising that power of choice. We haven’t been exercising that freedom. And so the potential, the possibility, just gets wasted. So what are you doing right now? Are you wasting that possibility? Are you taking advantage of it? The Buddhist teachings all start with this issue of what you’re doing. That’s why karma is such an important teaching. It underlies everything else. Mundane Right View starts with the teaching on karma, that our actions have results, and the results depend on the quality of the intentions. That’s why the Buddha has you start. Because for most of us, we don’t like to look at our actions. We say things that we regret having said, and so we learn to turn a blind eye to them. We pretend that we didn’t intend anything wrong, or that we really didn’t say it, or that it really didn’t harm anybody. It’s the same with the things we do, the things we think. This is an element where we really tend to be blind. We don’t like to think that our lives are so thoroughly shaped by our own actions, because we look at our lives and we see this is wrong and that’s wrong, and we don’t like to trace it back to anything we did. So one of the first things the Buddha has you do is look precisely at this issue. Try to get a sense of the power of your actions, the freedom you have in the present moment, to make choices. Then work with that power of choice. Choose to be more generous. Think of the way you’ve benefited from the generosity of others. Now it’s been such a good force in your life, the way you have the opportunity to be generous back. Think of the times when you were young. Some people could have harmed you, but they didn’t. You have the opportunity to develop that quality, the quality of restraint, the quality of virtue, as well. Then live your life with those thoughts in mind. Take advantage of this freedom that you have to choose, in the present moment, the freedom of intention. Learn to use it in a skillful way. Once you start using it in a skillful way, you start becoming more and more willing to look at the power of your intentions, to admit the mistakes you made in the past and resolve that you don’t want to make them again in the future. This ability to stay with your breath in the present moment, to develop this sense of ease, is a huge help in that direction. It’s easier to be generous when you’re feeling suffused with ease and rapture. It’s easier to be virtuous, to refrain from saying and doing things you know are harmful, when you have this sense of ease and rapture filling the body. So the skills of developing the breath, working with the breath, these are your friends, because they allow you to see your own actions more clearly. Both because they make you more sensitive and they put you in a position where you’re more willing to admit your mistakes and to learn from them. It’s in the context of the teaching on action that the Buddha teaches his more transcendent version of Right View as well. The teaching on suffering and the cause of suffering, what you can do to put an end to suffering. Because if your suffering weren’t dependent on your actions, there’d be nothing you could do to stop it. It’s because it is dependent on your actions. That’s why the path to the end of suffering makes sense. And as you’re more and more willing to look at your own actions, your actions, you’re more capable of developing the refinement, the precision, the powers of perception that allow you to see where you’re on the path to the end of suffering and where you’re off. You see things more and more clearly in these terms. This is how mundane Right View develops into transcendent Right View. It reminds you that if there is suffering in your life, you’ve been causing it. This is not to say other people haven’t done horrible things. They have. You don’t have to look very far into history. You don’t have to look very far even into the newspaper these days to see all the horrible things that are happening. But the reason your mind is so weighed down with suffering, that’s because of things you’re doing. It’s bad news to some people, but it’s actually good news, because you can learn to change what you’re doing. Act in ways that are less harmful to yourself. Act in ways that are less harmful to others. This takes a huge burden off the mind and allows you to see the more subtle and precise ways in which even the movements of the mind can cause stress, of a more subtle form. You focus on that. Learn how to stop doing that, because, again, it’s a choice. You have that freedom. The Buddha has us focus again and again and again on this issue of our intention, because that’s where, in the present moment, freedom is to be found. So pursue that. Why do you have this freedom of intention? The Buddha points out that what we do and say and think is not, or doesn’t have to be, totally determined by the past. We have freedom of choice. Explore that. That’s the window to total freedom. So working on the breath is not a distraction from the larger things that we want from the practice. It’s actually following that string that leads us out of the maze. Set up the intention to stay with the breath. Set up the intention to breathe comfortably. Try to stick with it. Simply trying to stick with an intention will help you to see all the strange other intentions that come floating through the mind and the way the mind will take on an intention that might be detrimental to it. But you don’t have to. That’s the important point. You don’t have to make unskillful choices. You can learn to make them more and more skillful. That’s why the path is a gradual one, because it’s like developing any skill. You work at it again and again and again, and suddenly you see something you didn’t see before. The only reason you see it is because of what you’re doing, because you’re focused on this issue. Bit by bit, you develop more powers of sensitivity. Even though you’re looking in the same place, you start seeing things you didn’t see before, not because they weren’t there before. It’s simply that your powers of perception were not that strong, not that subtle. But if you look again and again and again, you become more familiar with the territory. Your powers of perception grow, and you see more and more the subtle things that are going on. Finally, your powers of perception get so subtle that you can see even the slightest movements in the mind, even the slightest stress, and you realize you have the choice again not to do that, not to create that stress. It’s in seeing that that ultimate freedom can be found. This is where we pick up the string, the string that can take us out of the maze of all the suffering we’ve created for ourselves. Keep following it to see where it leads, and you won’t be disappointed. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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