Control

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There are so many things in life over which you have no control, even your own body. You can’t tell it to stay young forever. You can’t tell it to stay healthy forever. You can’t tell it to live forever. It’s just not going to do that. Everything of things outside, the people we love, the people we cherish, they can suddenly go without saying goodbye, without any closure. This is the common way of the world. Even our own minds. There’s lots of stuff that keeps popping up in the mind. It comes from past actions, and you can’t go back and undo your past actions. But we have the choice in the present moment what we’re going to focus on. And in the focusing, we make things grow. So, the question is, what are you going to make grow in your mind? You could spend your time obsessing about the things that you can’t control. But what does that foster? What does that make grow? It makes grow frustration, disappointment. And do you really want to foster those things in your mind? When you have the choice, you could foster things that are actually useful. There is this element of choice. It’s in the present moment. And as we meditate, this is what we’re focusing on. The element of choice lies in this intention. What are you going to focus on to make grow? You can make mindfulness grow. You can make concentration, discernment, all kinds of good qualities grow. It’s up to you. So, the meditation is devoted to gaining practice in the present moment. It’s devoted to focusing on the right things. Right now, you’re in this body and mind. You do have the potential for developing concentration and mindfulness. You’ve got the breath coming in and out. You’ve got the mind that thinks and is aware. It’s a focus on making those grow. In other words, developing the good potentials that lie there. You put these things together. It’s like taking a seed and putting it together with soil, water, and sunlight. When the things get put together, then the seed can grow. If the seed is sealed off in a little plastic bag someplace, the water is someplace else, the soil is someplace else, the sun is someplace else, the seed won’t grow. But if you put them all together, then things grow. So this is what you want to develop, the potential for a sense of well-being with the breath. The mind needs a good place to stay in the present moment if it’s going to stay here and really be alert to what’s going on. Focus on how the breathing feels. What kind of breathing feels good right now? It can be long breathing or short, or long in, short out, or short in and long out, or deep or shallow. Heavy, light, or someplace in between all these things. There is a potential for real comfort in the breathing, but you have to pay attention if you’re going to see that. So this is what you want to make grow. It’s a good foundation here for the mind to stay in the present moment, for the body and the mind to feel on good terms with each other. Now, think of the breathing as a whole body process. Which parts of the body do you tend to tense up when you’re breathing? To what extent are you adding a lot of unnecessary tension to the process? If you notice any tension in the body, think of it dissolving away with the out-breath. Then when a new in-breath comes in, you don’t have to tense up again. Some people find this disorienting because they’re used to breathing in a particular way, holding the body in a particular way, tensing up in a particular way when the breath comes in. And when they’re not doing that, it feels strange. But explore that possibility for a while. Breathing doesn’t have to be a tense process. And you don’t have to identify with a particular way of tensing the body. It’s just one more unnecessary thing you’re adding to the present moment. There’s so much in life where we add unnecessary pain, unnecessary suffering, on top of the stuff that’s already there. And it turns out that the unnecessary pain, the unnecessary suffering or stress, that’s what really has a big effect on the mind. We latch on to these things. And when we latch on to them, we trap ourselves. This is why the Buddha has the image of fire so predominant in his teachings. There was a belief in his day that fire burns because it latches on to its fuel. And then when it latches on to its fuel, it’s trapped. The fuel doesn’t trap it. It traps itself in the fuel. When the fire goes out, it’s because it lets go. And then it’s freed. The same principle applies to the mind. We trap ourselves in these things because we hold on to them. It’s when we learn how to let go. And sometimes you have to deal with a sense of it’s feeling really strange because you’ve been holding on so long that when you let go it feels very unusual, almost threatening, because you thought you had control over it. You had control over things by the way you held on. But it may have been an unskillful sense of control. It’s when you learn how to let go that you keep letting go. That’s when you begin to free the mind from a lot of the unnecessary suffering it causes for itself. The Buddha gives the analogy of a person being shot with an arrow. The simple fact of having a body, the fact that it’s going to grow ill, it’s going to get old, it’s going to die, and just the simple pains of having a body. The Buddha says that’s like being shot with one arrow. But then on top of that, we get all worked up around it. That’s a second arrow. Or you might want to say it’s not just a second arrow, it’s a whole slew of arrows that you shoot yourself with over and over and over again. It’s the second and third and fourth and fifth arrow. Those are the ones. It really hurts. Many times we shoot ourselves with those arrows because we’re trying to control the situation in a really unskillful way. Notice where you’re adding unnecessary stress, where you are fostering and creating the conditions where unnecessary stress and suffering will grow. Then notice how you don’t have to do that. That’s a simple place to watch. This is with the breath, the way you tense up around the breath, your idea of what you have to do in order to make the breath come in. Actually, you don’t have to do anything at all. The breath is going to come in and out on its own. If you had to do the breathing all the time, as soon as you forgot about the breath and were thinking about something else, you’d die. But it doesn’t happen that way. The breath just goes on automatic pilot and you’re free to think of other things. Yet when you’re sitting here focusing on the breath, you feel that you’ve got to do the controlling. You’ve got to tense up here, you’ve got to force it here, pull it in there. This is a primary example of all the unnecessary suffering we cause for ourselves in life when we try to control things in an unskillful way. So try to drop that sense of control. Then observe what really works. What does create a sense of ease in the present moment? That kind of control is skillful. What kind of intentions help? Sometimes it’s an intention just to watch. Other times it’s an intention to adjust things a little bit here, a little bit there. But you test it by seeing what creates stress and what doesn’t. This way you learn that your control comes from knowledge and not from ignorance, not from craving. It makes all the difference in the world. So learn to be more discerning in what you see in the present moment. Sometimes it feels as if there’s nothing at all you can control. Well, that’s a misperception. Other times you feel you’ve got to have everything under control. Well, that’s a misperception as well. Be more discerning. What can you control? What lies outside your control? You learn this by experimenting. And a good place to start is right here with the breath. There’s a lot to learn just focusing on the process of breathing because it teaches you a lot about how the mind reacts to other processes as well, how it gets involved, tries to control other processes as well. So the breath is not only a good place to settle and focus your attention so the mind can settle down and be still, but it’s also a good laboratory to learn about the mind. As you learn what kind of intentions are helpful, what kind of intentions are not, what kind of intentions lead to your trapping yourself in a particular state of mind, and what kind of intentions help free you, this is the place to learn. Once you understand the process of what the Buddha calls fabrication and the intention actions around the breath, that sharpens your sensitivity. So you begin to see other kinds of fabrication as well, particularly the way the mind talks to itself, the feelings and perceptions it creates in the present moment. Some of these are the results of past actions, but a lot of them come from your present actions as well, your present intentions. But to see that, you have to pay careful attention. So the breath is a good place to start and is a good place to take as your foundation. As long as you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. The longer you stay here, the more you get familiar with the present moment. Then you begin to see what are the possibilities here. In one of the discourses, the Buddha says there’s a potential for rapture here in the present moment. Just the sensations in the body, if you allow them to be for a while without you interfering with them too much. This doesn’t mean that you just let them go their own way. You make up your mind you’re going to stop your old habits of squeezing this and squeezing that in order to get the breath to come in and go out. If you maintain that intention long enough, the body develops a sense of fullness. The potential is there. You’ve got to figure out exactly how to relate to the breath in such a way that you can allow those potentials to grow. That makes it even easier to stay in the present moment because if you feel full and nourished here, the mind isn’t hungry. It’s not going to go running out looking for scraps, hoping to find happiness in things over which it has no control at all. It’s getting run over in the process. Spend some time familiarizing yourself with what you’ve got right here. There are lots of good potentials. There are lots of stressful potentials here. Through trial and error, learn which is which. This way you gain a greater and greater sensitivity for things over which you really do have some control because you’re looking in the right place.

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