Looking for Trouble

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We meditate with our eyes closed so as to cut down on distractions, so you can focus all of your attention at the work at hand, which is being with the breath, being sensitive to the breath and the body. When the breath comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know how it feels when it’s coming in and going out. Where do you sense the breath? What sensations tell you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out”? Which of those sensations are comfortable? Focus on the comfortable ones. Get to know them. This takes a lot of attention, not only because the breath is silent, but because it’s an area of our awareness that we really tend to block out. So we have to unlearn a lot of deeply ingrained habits, which requires focused attention. Intentness is the quality they call it in the texts, citta. You’re really intent in what you’re doing. You’re paying a lot of attention to how this area of your awareness feels. The more fully intent you are, the more you notice. The more you notice, the better the results of your meditation. And you find that you develop a whole world inside here, or you explore a whole world as you meditate. And you develop the different potentials you have in the body, potentials that you hadn’t noticed before. There’s a potential for ease, a potential for pleasure, the potential for rapture. They’re all here in the body. Simply if you give them enough attention, give them enough time and space, they’ll start showing what they’ve got. But the fact that we do this with our eyes closed doesn’t mean that it’s meant to be done only with our eyes closed. There’s also meditation with your eyes open. It’s called restraint of the senses. And in most of the standard texts, it comes as a prerequisite for gaining concentration, in other words, learning how to create a space in your mind even when your eyes are not closed and there are other things coming in through your eyes, your ears, your nose, your tongue, sensations coming in from the body. Because when these things are coming in, it’s not just stuff coming in. There’s also stuff going out as well. It’s possible for us to go out and look for trouble in the way we look and listen and smell and taste things. Touch things. And that’s the aspect that really destroys our concentration. It really destroys this world we’re developing inside. So that’s an important part of the practice as well. When you leave meditation, you get up and walk around. Remember this area of your awareness, the breath sensations in the body, they’re still there. And you have to learn how to make space for them even though other issues may start impinging on you. As I said, the big issues impinging are not the things coming in from outside. It’s the mind’s anticipation of what it’s going to see and what it’s going to hear and how it’s going to react. Because the way you look at something or the way you listen to something makes all the difference in the world. You can look in a way that gives rise to lust. You can look in a way that gives rise to anger. You can look in a way that gives rise to fear, greed, anxiety. The outside stimuli don’t create these things. It’s the mind that creates these things. And many times it creates them before the stimulus even comes in. That’s what you’ve got to watch for. So when you leave the formal meditation, remind yourself that you’ve got this inner world that’s like a little bubble you want to carry around with you. Make sure it doesn’t pop. And beware of the fact that it’s impulses coming from within that can destroy the bubble. If you’re determined to protect it, you start noticing the ways the mind flows out. As Ajahn Lee said, this is the real meaning of asava, a very mysterious term in the texts, outflows or influxes or effluents, fermentations. It comes down to the sense of how the mind flows out your eyes and your ears, your nose, your tongue, your body, to get in touch with that world you’re so familiar with outside, and all the reactions and all the attitudes that you’ve carried around with regard to that world. To the point where we’ve forgotten that we’re the ones that create these reactions, we create these associations. They tell of people who’ve been blind from birth who, in a few cases, can be given their sight back, but they find it confusing. They haven’t developed the part of the brain that’s needed to interpret these forms that they see. And a lot of our life has been spent in developing that part of the brain, the part that goes out and creates a three-dimensional world out of these flashes of blue and green and red and black and white and gray that we pick up from the eyes. This is just one example of how much our world is the creation of the mind. We may all be sitting in the same room here, but each of us lives in a different world. In fact, the Buddhist definition of “world” is eyes and sights, nose and smells, ears and sounds, and so on, down through the senses. It’s just it. It’s just what you create are these sensory impressions. So remind yourself, it’s not so much things coming in from outside that are going to be the problem in destroying your concentration or destroying your mindfulness. It’s the attitude you have that you carry out to these things. The Buddha’s not saying not to look at things or not to listen. He’s saying just look with wisdom, listen with wisdom. When you see something that would ordinarily give rise to fear, try to look at it in a way that doesn’t give rise to fear. When you see something that would give rise to anxiety, learn to look at it in a way that doesn’t. The same with lust, the same with anger, greed, all of these emotions. And you know the things that tend to trigger you, so watch out for them. Make sure that the trigger isn’t pulled, because you’re the one that’s pulling the trigger. So the skills we learn here as we sit here with our eyes closed focusing on the breath, they’re not meant just for the monastery or just for the meditation hall or just for the times of formal meditation practice. They’re meant to be used all the time. You can be in touch with your breath. You can learn how to give a sense of ease in the breathing anywhere at all. It’s possible. You can even give a sense of fullness to the body, different parts of the body, as you need it, even with your eyes open and all kinds of blaring sounds coming in. Try to think of yourself as totally porous. Whatever comes in, you can go right through. It doesn’t have to hang on inside, like a big window screen. The breeze flows through the screen, and the screen doesn’t catch the breeze. That way you can find that you can maintain this inner world, even though the outer world seems to be all over the place, everywhere, inhabiting all your awareness. You find that this inner world is still here all the time, and you can maintain contact with it. Learn to value it. Learn to treasure it. Don’t be quick to throw it away. The habits we learn here are not habits just for this place. They’re meant to be habits that you take with you all the time. So make sure your priorities are straight. Many times as you go out in the world, you’ve got to deal with this, you’ve got to deal with that, and this is more important than, “To hell with the breath, I’ve got to work on this.” Those attitudes are totally unnecessary. You can be with the breath. You can deal with the issues of the world outside at the same time. In fact, you end up dealing with them with a lot more poise, a lot more clarity, if you can maintain this inner sense of the breath energy in the body. So a lot of this has to do with understanding. It’s not so much that the world outside is barging in to destroy your meditation. You’re the one that goes flowing out. You’re the one that has to work to destroy it. So watch for those currents. Learn to sit in a place that you can watch a current go out and not get swept along by it. And you notice that if you’re not riding along with the current, it only goes so far, and then it just dies away. This is probably why the Buddha used the image of the island. You’re still in the river, but you’re on the island. You’ve got a space. You’ve got your foundation for mindfulness, your foundation for concentration, right here at the breath. When it gets comfortable, you can think of spreading it all through the body so you have a whole-body awareness in the midst of everything else that’s going on. So the river may flow, it may even be strong, but you’re on your island. So don’t be the one to destroy the island. If you don’t destroy it, nothing else can.

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