Discernment Purifies the Mind

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Focus on the breath. Be with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Let it be comfortable all the way in, all the way out. Notice whether long breathing feels good or short breathing, or anywhere in between. Deep, shallow, heavy, light. Experiment with the breathing for a while to see what feels best, and say on top of what feels best, because it may change. This gives benefits both to the body and to the mind. When the breath feels good, the other functions of the body, other processes in the body, are allowed to be more normal. And it creates a good place for the mind to stay. If you’re going to stay in the present moment, try to make the present moment as comfortable as you can. The breath is a very quick and inexpensive way of doing that. You don’t have to pay for your breath. It hasn’t been privatized yet. So it’s simply a matter of skill. Learning to stay with a comfortable breath requires that you watch it for a while to gain a sense of what really is comfortable, what the potentials for the breath are. That takes time. And gaining a sense of what’s right for just now can take time as well. But the advantage is, over time, you become more sensitive. That shades into benefits for the mind. The mind has a good place to stay, and it becomes more sensitive, more alert. It’s easier to stay mindful of the breath when the breath is comfortable. And as the breath gets more subtle, you become more alert to the subtleties of the breath. All this creates good qualities in the mind, and that’s what we’re here for. Focus on the breath, but we’re here to catch the mind. So use the breath to catch the mind. The John Freud analogy is of trying to catch eels. If you just jump down into the mud to catch the eels with your bare hands, they just slither off every which way. But if you find something that the eels like—one thing that eels like is a dead dog. So you find a dead dog someplace and you stick it in a big jar, stick it down in the mud, and the eels will come into the jar without you having to do anything else. Then you just close off the mouth of the jar and you’ve got your eels. We focus on the breath, but we’re here to basically catch the mind, because the mind is the big issue in life. As the Buddha said, we suffer not because of the body, but because of the mind. Just now, even the eyes, the ears, nose, tongue, body—they’re on fire, but they’re on fire with what? Greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are qualities of the mind. They may have an impact on the body, and you notice that when anger arises, your breath will change. When lust arises, your breath will change. Your experience of the body changes with these different mental qualities. But that’s not the trouble. The trouble is what comes out of the mind. That’s what we’re here to focus on. That’s what we’re here to clean up. The Buddha asks us to be alert to the present moment and to be mindful. He wants us to keep in mind four things as we approach the present moment—that there is suffering, and there’s a cause to suffering, and the possibility of putting an end to suffering, and then there’s a path to that possibility, a path that actually actualizes it. These things should be kept in the back of your mind someplace. Even when you’re focusing on the breath, you run into periods when the mind says, “Why are you bothering me with the breath?” And the answer should come, “Okay, we’re here to develop concentration. The breath is a good place to develop concentration because it’s part of the path. So we develop it, we work on it, and then you pay attention to the breath and try to develop concentration around the breath.” The reason the Buddha has us focus on these four things is because suffering is the big issue in life. It’s the big problem in life. And as with any problem, you want to direct your attention precisely to where the issue is, where the cause is, and not let yourself get distracted by other things. So when you’re focusing on the present moment, you want to focus on any one of these four issues. Like right now, we’re focusing on the path, and the duty with regard to the path is to develop it, to let it grow, to nourish it. The heart of the path is concentration, so you develop concentration around the breath. So when the Buddha says to be alert, it’s not to be simply aware of everything that comes into the range of your awareness. He focuses your attention on the specific issues that really are important. If there were no problems in life, you could be very choiceless in your awareness and just let your mind wander from here to there and note this and note that without any particular need to focus on anything particular at all. But that’s not the case. There are patterns in life. Suffering does come from craving. Craving comes from ignorance. These are qualities of the mind. These are the things we’re trying to abandon. There are the defilements—passion, aversion, delusion. As I said, they may leave their traces in the body, but the source of the problem is in the mind. So that’s where we’ve got to focus on learning to understand things. How do we clean these things? It’s through discernment. Discernment gets developed by being concentrated and trying to be as sensitive as possible to movements in the body and movements in the mind. The movements in the body are important because they reflect what’s going on in the mind. So you want to learn to watch. What’s the mind doing? Where is it focusing? Right now you want it to focus on the breath. As for anything that takes you away from the breath, you can regard that as unskillful, for the time being at least. So if you see the mind’s going off in an unskillful direction, just drop it. You don’t have to follow it through. Sometimes we get involved in a storyline and want to see it through to the end. But when you realize that these stories are all just fabrications in the mind, you don’t have to follow them through. Just drop it. A friend of mine tells a story. He says, “There’s a question you can ask people. Suppose you’re in a dream, and in the dream you’re sitting in a boat with all the members of your family. There’s an evil person also in the boat who’s asking you to decide which person in the family should die. He’s going to kill one. And if you refuse to make a choice, he’s going to kill them all. So you’ve got to choose. Who are you going to choose? Your mother? Your father? Your children? What?” My friend said, “When you ask this question of adults, they really get concerned and they try to balance everything out. If you ask it of children, they say, ‘Wait a minute, this is a dream. We just wake up. That’s the end of the problem.’” A lot of the distractions in our minds are just that—they’re dreams. We don’t have to be involved in them. So once a thought comes up in the mind, you’re not committed to following it through, to seeing it through, to seeing how it’s going to turn out in the end. Just drop it in midstream, in mid-sentence. Leave it hanging and then come back to the breath. This is good exercise in mindfulness and alertness. And it’s the beginning of discernment. You begin to see how you get entangled in these things. Because that’s how the mind is purified. It’s through discernment, through understanding. Sometimes we’re told that mindfulness will purify you, or that working through the energy knots in your body will purify you, or non-reactivity will purify you, or burnout will purify you, or all your old karma. The Buddha never taught that. He said the only thing that purifies the mind is discernment. And discernment lies in seeing why you do things and seeing through all the unskillful things you do, and learning how to understand them to the point where you don’t want to do them anymore. That’s what cleanses the mind. That’s what purifies the mind. So even though we work with the breath, we’re working with it to the extent that the mind can settle down and then it can really watch. We use the breath as something to focus on to develop our powers of sensitivity. But then we want to turn those sensitivities onto the mind itself. That’s where the real work lies.

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