Ardency

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Notice where you feel the breath and stay focused on those sensations. The sensations that tell you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And stick with them. Keep watching them. The Pali term for this is anubhasana. Anubhasana means following and looking. In other words, you keep track of this to see what’s going to happen. The more consistently you keep track, the more you’re going to see. Now, to keep track requires three qualities. One is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you’re keeping the breath in mind. The second quality is alertness, which means being clearly aware of what you’re doing. In other words, when you’re with a breath, you know. When you’re not with a breath, you know. You also know what the breath is doing. Is it coming in? Is it going out? How does it feel? That’s the duty of alertness. Finally, there’s a quality called ardency. Ardency is the effort to do this as skillfully as possible. Lying behind all this is something called appropriate attention. This is what defines what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. Appropriate attention means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. You see their stress. There’s a cause for stress, something that arises along with it, something you’re doing right now that creates the stress. There’s a basic stress in everything that’s compounded, but here particularly we’re talking about the stress that comes from things you do in ignorance and things you do out of craving. You want to look for the ignorance. You want to look for the craving. So you can let them go. Then there’s the path to the end of stress, and finally the actual end of stress itself. Those are the things to look for in the present moment. Those are the topics you want to focus on. When you’re dealing with a breath, this can turn out in several ways. One is that you might see that the breath is stressful. So what do you do? You try to comprehend, “Well, where is the stress? To what extent is the stress simply a part of any breathing? To what extent are you adding on to the stress?” Not necessarily. You want to comprehend that. In other words, you want to see it clearly until you develop a sense of dispassion for the stress that you add to things. So you can focus on that. Or you can focus more on the effort to keep track of the breath, to be more and more consistent in following the breath. To strengthen your concentration. To strengthen your focus. Those are the primary things you focus on, either developing the path or comprehending the stress. They go together, but you’ll find there are times in your meditation when you stress one more than the other. But particularly in the beginning, what you want to do is focus on developing your powers of concentration. Because the more focused you are, then the more clearly you’re going to see things. So those are the three qualities you bring. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. And all this is trained by appropriate attention. Your desire to see where you’re creating unnecessary suffering. It’s all over, even in the way you breathe. The Buddha said, “If it’s done with ignorance, it leads to suffering.” When you’re ignorant, the ways your mind talks to itself are going to lead to suffering. The way you relate to feelings and perceptions is going to lead to suffering. The only way to cut through that ignorance is to be as consistently aware as possible. This is why we start with the breath. It’s right here, something immediately present, and something we tend not to pay much attention to. After all, if we don’t pay attention to it, it’ll still come in and go out. So the question comes, “Well, why bother?” For one thing, the breath keeps you grounded in the present moment, where the mind is creating unnecessary suffering and stress. Secondly, when you’re close to the breath, you’re also close to all the processes of fabrication or intention in the mind. When you’re close to your intentions, that’s when you begin to see where the ignorance is. This is one area of the mind where we tend to cover things up, don’t pay much attention, and we’re not really all that honest with ourselves about our intentions. This is where the real ignorance lies. It’s not a metaphysical thing or an abstract thing that you’re ignorant of somebody’s teachings. You’re simply ignorant about your own intentions and how your intentions cause suffering. If you were to be able to look at these things more and more directly, you’d see that even though we tell ourselves that we want to create happiness, we want to be happy, the things we do create suffering. We carry it around with us all the time. Even though we tell ourselves that we love ourselves, that we would want to find true happiness, still we keep on creating all this suffering. This is where we have to pay very close attention to our intentions. It may seem like we’re focusing on little, tiny things when the vast space of the unconditioned is all around us, just waiting to be found. But you don’t find it by just getting spacey. You find it by paying very close attention to what you’re doing, catching yourself in the act of creating suffering, and then learning how to let go, i.e., how to stop doing that. It’s in the stopping, seeing unskillful intentions, learning to drop them, and dropping them with your awareness. That’s where the knowledge for awakening will arise. It’s in looking at the details that you’re going to open up to something larger. A lot of people don’t like that idea. They’d rather just let go. Their lives are a mess, and instead of trying to straighten out the mess, they’d like to say, “Well, the mess doesn’t matter, because I’m opening up to something bigger.” Somehow the mess will take care of itself. You’ve got to clean up your messes. There are no two ways around it. This means looking at parts of the mind that you ordinarily don’t like to look at, i.e., your motivation for doing things, because sometimes it’s much less than honorable intentions. We don’t like to admit to ourselves that we have dishonorable intentions, but there they are. And you’re not going to escape them by denying them, because that just creates more ignorance, which leads to more suffering. This is why meditation is a chastening project. As John Lee once said, when you meditate, when you start practicing, what you see is your defilements. You get a chance to study them, and you study them not to accept them for what they are. You accept them just to the extent that you realize, “Okay, there they are. We’ve got to do something about them.” Because that’s the other thing you’ve got to accept, is that you can do something about these things. It may take time. It takes energy. It takes a lot of dedication, because this is a long-term project. That’s something you also have to accept. Once you’ve accepted it, you get to work. Each of those Four Noble Truths has a duty, so there’s an imperative built into the practice. So right now we’re focusing on the imperative of trying to be more and more mindful, more and more concentrated. Keep the mind centered on the breath, and then figure out how to do it skillfully. If you put too much pressure on the breath, that’s going to cause problems down the road. The body will feel uncomfortable. When the body feels uncomfortable, then you’re not going to want to stay. So the question is how to develop a level of concentration, a level of mindfulness that you can maintain consistently. This takes practice. As they say in the text, pavito bahulikato, you develop it. You pursue it. You do it again and again and again. But as with any skill, the practicing doesn’t lie just in putting in lots of hours. It means being really observant as to what’s going on, trying to catch where you’re adding unnecessary stress, unnecessary hardship, unnecessary burden to the project, and then learning how to stop adding those unnecessary moments. So this is what anupasana is all about. You stick with one thing and you watch it continually. Then you keep watch for all the other mental habits you have that are going to come around this. As they say, the way you do anything is the way you do everything. If you tend to live your life in a sloppy way, your meditation is going to start out sloppy. If you live in a haphazard, careless way, your meditation is going to start out haphazard and careless. But you can change your habits. If you couldn’t change your habits, there’d be no point in trying to practice. There wouldn’t have been any point in the Buddha’s teaching. People would be stuck the way they are and there’d be nothing anybody could do. But we can change our habits if we see that they really are causing us problems and if we have the desire to want to change. So try to be ardent in the practice. Try to do it as skillfully as you can, being observant, being honest with yourself with what works and what doesn’t work. John Lee has a nice image in one of his talks. He says it’s like learning how to weave a basket. The teacher can tell you the basic patterns for weaving and give you some examples, but you’re the one who has to learn how to weave. You’re the one who has to teach yourself how to weave. Once you’ve got the basic patterns, that doesn’t mean you’re going to learn how to make a nice weave or a consistent weave or make a basket that really looks good. That requires your own powers of observation. So you make a basket and you look at it. How’s the weave? Is it fine enough? Is it consistent enough? If it’s not, what can you do? You go back and you look at the way you weave things to see where you’re inconsistent. To see where you’re careless, where you’re not paying attention. And to learn to pay more attention to what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. Over time, if you follow this through, you find the baskets get better and better. It’s the same with the breath. You train the mind. You use the breath as your means for training the mind, in the same way that you use the vines or whatever it is you’re weaving for the basket. You use those as your teachers. And over time, you get more mindful. Your powers of concentration develop. Quality of ardency is really important in the practice. Mindfulness is something we all have to some extent or another. We can keep certain things in mind. The question is, are we keeping the right things in mind? And to some extent, we have some alertness. We know, to some extent, what we’re doing. It’s the ardency that takes those things and turns them into qualities that really can make a revolutionary change in the mind. Ardency is informed by a knowledge of what’s right effort, informed by the vulnerable truths and the duties appropriate to them. In other words, informed by appropriate attention. Learning what’s important to focus on, what you don’t have to focus on, and really sticking with the things that are going to make a difference. Learning how to breathe in a way that’s not ignorant. Learning how to think about the breath in a way that’s not ignorant. Learning how to relate to your feelings and perceptions. Realizing that you can change the labels that you put on things. And it’s going to have an impact on how you breathe and how you feel. All these things are interrelated. So bring as much alertness and ardency to the practice as you can. Be as mindful as you can. These are the qualities that will allow you to see. you

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