Cutting Through the Hype

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Stay focused on the process of breathing. Whatever sensations in the body tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Try to stay with those sensations. You don’t even have to listen to the Dharma talk. Let that be in the background. It’s like a wall. If you leave the breath, you’ll run into the Dharma talk, and the purpose of the talk is to point you back to the breath. Otherwise, don’t let it distract you, because where are you going to see what’s happening in the mind, unless you look right here in the present moment? The words of the talk are simply pointers, trying to keep you focused on the issue of what you’re doing right now. This is the Buddha’s whole approach to the doing. He talks very little about what you are. In fact, he never answers that question precisely, “What are you?” Because that’s not the problem. The problem is what you’re doing. What are you doing that’s creating suffering? And what could you possibly do that would put an end to suffering? It’s the doing that makes all the difference. He never says that we’re intrinsically good; he doesn’t say we’re intrinsically bad. When he was asked, “Even if we have a self,” he refused to answer the question. He didn’t say no; he didn’t say yes. He tries to keep you balanced right here in the present moment and looking for actions and results, cause and effect. So the first place you want to encounter that balance is right here with the breath. Notice which thoughts keep you with the breath and which thoughts pull you away. For the time being, side with the thoughts that keep you with the breath. To make it more pleasant to be here, try to keep the breath comfortable. Don’t force it too much. There is a tendency when we decide that we’re going to concentrate on something that we clamp down, put a lot of pressure on it, for fear that if we don’t put a lot of pressure on it, we’re going to slip away. And that makes it unpleasant. So instead of keeping us here, the clamping down actually, as soon as we lose our focus or have a lapse of mindfulness, that clamping down makes us bounce off even stronger. So think of it more as simply keeping in time with the breath. You’re not trying to squeeze the breath or grab it. You just touch it. When I was first studying with Ajahn Fu, he would often talk about “catching the breath.” The word “catching” can also mean “to hold.” So I was doing my best to hold the breath in that way of trying to surround it and keep it clamped down. Of course, that made it worse. Then one day, I happened to be sitting meditating on the bus in Bangkok and found that if I didn’t clamp down, I’d just allow it to come in and go out on its own. It was a lot more pleasant. So, being a typical Westerner, I went to complain to him. I said, “Why don’t you teach us to catch the breath? The more we catch it, the worse it gets.” He laughed. He said, “That’s not what he meant. It’s just sort of keep in touch with it. The touch doesn’t have to be very heavy at all, just heavy enough so you can stay with the breath. Keep track of it as continuously as possible.” It’s the continuity that makes all the difference. We’re trying to see cause and effect. If you’re not looking continually from the cause to the effect, you’ll see just causes in isolation or effects in isolation, and you won’t see how they’re connected. So you wouldn’t even know that they are connected. So stay as continually with the breath as you can. You can experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best. This is where you first begin to see relationships between cause and effect. You breathe in a certain way. What influence does it have on how you experience the body? What influence does it have on the mind? Try long breathing for a while and see what that does. If you like the results, stick with it. If you don’t, you can change. Shorter in-breaths, shorter out-breaths, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. You can focus in different parts of the body. As long as you’re conscious about what you’re doing or what changes are happening in the breath, then you can start seeing how does the breath affect the mind, how does the breath affect the other sensations in the body? Because it’s this sensitivity to cause and effect that’s going to go deeper and deeper in the practice as you get more sensitive, even to vagrant thoughts coming through the mind. When your sensitivity gets really focused, really subtle, you can see a little bit of craving coming and then going away. Or you can see a particular perception coming into the mind and then going away. And you can start seeing the impact it has. That’s when you begin to get a really good sense of what’s skillful and what’s not. This issue of skillfulness is very basic to all the Buddhist teachings. There was once a layperson who was approached by someone from another religion and asked, “What does your teacher teach?” He went down the list of the hot issues among the philosophers in those days. He wanted to know if the Buddha took sides in any of them. It turned out that the Buddha didn’t take sides in any of them at all. So the person from the other religion accused the layperson. He said, “Your teacher, as a nihilist, doesn’t teach anything.” And the layperson said, “No, that’s not true. My teacher teaches one thing that’s really important, what’s skillful and what’s not skillful.” Skillful meaning things that don’t create harm, don’t create suffering. Unskillful means things that do create harm and suffering. That’s essential. That’s what you’re looking for here. This is probably one of the most interesting applications of cause and effect. It’s not so much physical causes and effects. It’s more exploring the process of cause and effect to see if you can put an end to suffering. So the focus here is based on goodwill, the desire for happiness. And happiness has to be attained through understanding. You can’t just blunder your way into it. We experiment, we test, see what works, see what doesn’t work. Most of us don’t like doing that, but most of us have a built-in advertising agency in the mind. We come up with an idea, “I’d like to do this.” And then the mind can elaborate on it and create all the hype you need in order to get going, to search for that form of happiness. And then when it comes, it’s usually not much, but you can embroider it more. The hype while you’re doing it, the hype after you’re doing it, can get pretty intense. So the next time you think of doing it again, you say, “Well, yeah, that was great,” even though it was all hype, all camera angles, special effects. That’s one of the things we want to learn how to look for. Just look at things in and of themselves, the actual feeling of pleasure, the actual feeling of pain. How long does it last? What is it like when you don’t embroider these things? What can stand up to the test that’s good even if it’s not embroidered? So this requires patience, it requires mindfulness, concentration, and the ability to stay focused on just this, “What am I doing? What’s the effect? When am I elaborating the effect to make the pleasure worse or to make the pain worse than it has to be?” The mind does a lot of that as well. If you catch yourself on the act, then you can stop the elaborating and get a much better sense of actual cause and effect, what’s really leading to happiness and what’s not. This can be revolutionary. Many times we find ourselves entangled in all kinds of arrangements and lots of responsibilities that are not helpful for anyone at all. But someplace in the mind there’s the hype that says, “This is going to be good. This is going to be important.” What’s liberating about this practice is you begin to see those arrangements for what they are. If they really are harmful, you drop them. You don’t need them. Life gets a lot simpler that way, maintaining this focus at all times. What are you doing? What are the results? Some of the results come immediately. Some of the results will come only over time. But if you learn how to watch carefully and consistently, you’ll see the connection. That cuts through all the hype. The reward of all this is ultimately you’ll find a form of happiness that stands the test. It doesn’t need any hype. It doesn’t need a lot of philosophical embroidery to make it sound impressive, because it’s there. It’s true happiness. You realize that nothing can change it because no conditions can touch it. The question of what it is and who’s behind it, you realize that those actually get in the way. As Ajahn Suat once said, “Once you attain the ultimate happiness, you’re not going to ask who’s experiencing it, because the fact that it’s the ultimate happiness, that’s plenty enough right there.” So it’s just this simple process of noticing what you’re doing and noticing the results. This can cut through a lot of unnecessary issues and take you straight to the things that really matter.

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