Fighting Off Ignorance

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The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means development. Because when you’re meditating, you’re developing qualities of mind. Take, for instance, focusing on the breath. To stay with the breath, you have to keep it in mind. You can’t let yourself forget, otherwise you go wandering off in your old ways. That ability to keep this one thing in mind, that’s mindfulness. Every time you breathe in, try to remember, “This is where you want to be. This is where you want to stay.” Alertness is what helps you to check, to see what you’re doing. Are you staying with the breath? Are you wandering off? If you catch yourself wandering off, come back. That develops a third quality of mind. Mindfulness is persistence. You’ve really got to stick with this. Simply thinking about the breath for a minute or two and then wandering off, that doesn’t accomplish anything. But if you keep coming back, coming back, coming back, it’s going to make a difference. It’s like the muscles in your body. The ones that you don’t exercise begin to atrophy. The ones you do exercise, as long as you feed yourself properly, begin to grow. So the more you exercise qualities like mindfulness, alertness, and persistence, the stronger they become. Then you start using your powers of evaluation. How does the breath feel? Do you like the way it feels? How about if you breathed in a different way? John Lee recommends starting out with some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. In other words, very consciously making the breath long. Then see how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to exercise your own sensitivity to what feels good and what doesn’t feel good. If you’re not sure, stick with something for a while until you know for sure that this is having a good or a bad effect. It’s easy for the mind to stay with this kind of breathing, or it’s hard. You can also experiment with where you’re going to focus. You’re going to focus at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, the middle of the head, the base of the throat. There are lots of places you can focus your attention, and each of them will have a different effect. So check to see for yourself which is the best place to stay right now. As you develop your powers of evaluation, that develops your discernment. As you become more sensitive to this part of your awareness, you realize it really does have an impact both on the body and on the mind. You can decide whether the impact is leading in the direction of more stress or less stress. And you see that the less stress you create for yourself, you’re going to be in a better position, both for your own sake and to help people around you. When you’re weighing yourself down with stress and problems, you’re a weight not only on yourself but also on the people around you. So the meditation is a gift, both to yourself and the people around you. This simple exercise, staying with the breath, develops a lot of good qualities in the mind, if you understand what you’re doing and if you stick with it. Again, it’s like exercising the body. If you want to develop strength in your arms, you have to understand what your arms do. And then you stick with the exercises that are really helpful. But strength of mind is a lot more important than strength of body, because it comes down to this old issue of suffering. The Buddha said that was what he taught, suffering and the end of suffering. That was the focus of forty-five years of teaching, because he saw that as the most important problem in life. We all want happiness, but we cause ourselves suffering. Some people in his day taught that it was because, well, that’s just the way things are. You’re forced by either the creator of the world or you’re forced by impulse. Personal fate or your past actions make it necessary that you’re going to have to suffer, so you just have to put up with it. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. The reason we suffer has something to do with past action, but it has an awful lot to do with our present actions. You need to develop good qualities of the mind, like mindfulness, alertness, your powers of evaluation and discernment. You begin to see exactly what you’re doing that’s causing suffering, and you realize you have an alternative. You don’t have to think that way. You don’t have to breathe that way. The Buddha explains that all the causal factors of suffering start out with ignorance. Conditioned by ignorance, we fabricate our experience. Some of that fabrication comes in from the past, but a lot of it is the choices we’re making right now. For instance, you can choose to breathe in different ways. You can choose to ignore the breath or you can choose to pay attention to the breath. You can actually breathe in ways that make your body sick. In fact, a lot of people breathe just that way. They carry tension around in their bodies because they’re breathing unskillfully. Then there’s a way you frame thoughts and ideas in your mind. This is called directed thought and evaluation. You focus on certain things as being important, and then you evaluate whether they’re good or bad, what you want to do about them. That kind of thing is called verbal fabrication. That can be skillful or unskillful, especially if you’re doing it under the influence of ignorance, i.e., you don’t understand what’s causing suffering and what’s not, and what you could do to put an end to that. You tend to focus on other issues, and when you’re focusing on other issues, lots of stress builds up. You’re not just ordained God. Sometimes you can really cause yourself a lot of suffering simply by the way you think. Then finally, there’s mental fabrication. There are your feelings and perceptions. We tend to think of feelings, i.e., the feeling tone of pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain, pretty much as a given. But if you look at the way you react to certain sensations in your body, you begin to see that you have an element of choice. Sometimes a sensation is perfectly neutral, but you decide you don’t like it, and you turn it into pain. Or vice versa. It’s pretty neutral, but you decide you like it. It becomes pleasure. That’s very much related to the other mental fabrication, which is perception, the labels you put on things. You say, “This is good. That’s bad.” Or when pain comes, you have a particular mental image of the pain that can actually make it worse. Say pain has taken hold of your knee. Pain doesn’t hold anything. You get the feelings of pain and just your basic physical feelings of having a knee there—warmth, solidity, movement, coolness. You get them all mixed up. So it’s a sensation. As if you couldn’t feel your knee without the pain, or you couldn’t focus on the sensations of knee without pain. They all get confused. So it’s in this way that our ignorance creates a lot of suffering, even right out at the gate. You breathe in ways that create suffering. You think about things. You label things in ways that create suffering, all because of your ignorance. So when you’re developing good qualities of mind, you’re learning to fight back that ignorance. When you’re mindful, when you’re alert, you develop your powers of evaluation and discernment. You develop your powers of concentration. All these things work together to create an area of awareness in the present moment. We start with the breath. Be aware of the breath coming in and going out. Notice when it’s comfortable. Notice when it’s not. Realize that you have a choice in how you are going to breathe. Nobody’s forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. Even if they were to throw you into prison and torture you, they wouldn’t know how you were breathing. If you could focus properly, you could learn how to breathe comfortably, even in miserable situations. So it’s a good skill to know that you have this power here to create a sense of ease and well-being inside that doesn’t have to depend on outside conditions. That’s a valuable lesson right there. As for your direct thought and evaluation, for the time being, you want to just direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath. Be very deliberate in what you’re trying to think about. As for the labels you put on things, think of the whole body as breath energy. See if that makes the breathing easier. When you breathe in, think of energy coming in and out of every pore of your body. There’s also a basic level of energy in the body that’s there, whether you’re breathing in, whether you’re breathing out. So you’re not squeezing the energy as you breathe out. You’re not stuffing it in as you breathe in. Everything comes in, goes out with a sense of ease. It’s good when the breath is comfortable that you start moving your focus around to notice how the breathing feels in different parts of the body. Try to make a survey. A good place to start is down around the navel. Watch that for a while as you breathe in and breathe out. If you notice any sense of tension or tightness, allow it to relax. Then move up the torso, the solar plexus, the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. Then, starting at the back of the neck, down your spine, out your legs, out to the toes, even your little toes. Start again at the back of the neck and go down your shoulders, down your arms, out to the fingers. Again, even to your little fingers. Anywhere you sense tension or tightness, allow it to relax. Think of the breath coming in and out of the whole body. It’s not air coming in and out, of course, but there’s an energy flow that’s possible if you relax all the muscles. It’s going out to the skin. As you hold that perception of breath energy flowing without obstruction, you find that the feeling of the breath gets a lot more comfortable. There’s a sense of fullness that can come. So what you’re doing here is you’re taking the power you have to shape your experience of the present. You’re learning how to use it with awareness, not with ignorance, but with awareness. So even sitting here without any outside stimulus, without all the activities that you’re used to doing, you find that you can create a sense of well-being in the body. It’s totally independent. This is just the beginning of the practice. But I can show you, you do have the ability to affect how you experience the present moment, totally independently of what’s actually happening out there. After all, the primary causes of suffering, as the Buddha said, start with ignorance. It’s not ignorance of a particular teaching so much, it’s ignorance of not paying attention to the issue of where is there stress and what’s causing it, and what can you do to put an end to it. Think in those terms. Then develop the skills that you need. The knowledge that the Buddha is talking about here is not just an either/or thing, either you know it or you don’t. It’s more like that gradually developing knowledge that comes with a skill, because each of the Four Noble Truths has a skill, has a task appropriate to it. You’re trying to comprehend where there’s stress and where there’s suffering. So you can see the cause. When you see the cause, it’s your craving. It’s really unnecessary. When you see that it’s unnecessary, you can drop it. To do that, it requires powers of mindfulness and alertness, all of which are developed by the path. As you learn to appreciate the ways in which suffering grows less and less, you’re approaching the end of suffering. So we’re working on a skill here. This is why the Buddhist path is a gradual path. If it were simply a matter of knowing or not knowing something, it would be instantaneous. You get the knowledge and there you are. That’s the end of the problem. But here it’s a skill, and that takes time. Gradually you come to understand where you’re causing stress. As you get more sensitive, you see even more subtle levels of stress, and you learn how to work through those as well. You finally get to a point of completion where you really have mastered the skill. The skill is appropriate to all the Four Noble Truths. The image the Buddha gives is of going out in the ocean. The continental shelf off of India is very much like the continental shelf off the eastern coast of the United States. It goes out very gradually and then there’s a sudden drop. So as you’re working, you work on this gradual path bit by bit by bit. You learn things, you see things you didn’t see before, and there are setbacks, but you learn how to take the setbacks in stride. But gradually you make more and more use of this potential you have for shaping your present experience. So you’re not just a victim of past conditions. You’re taking an active role. You’re making your present a better place to be. Finally, when all of these skills reach a point of completion, there’s a sudden opening. Touch what the Buddha calls the Deathless, something totally free of conditions. But you don’t get there without following this path of conditioning. You’re reconditioning yourself, exercising these qualities of mind. Alertness, mindfulness, your powers of evaluation, discernment, the persistence and concentration that allow you to watch things very carefully and very consistently. These are the things that fight back the ignorance so that you can shape the present moment in more and more skillful ways. Until it opens up, you don’t have to shape anything anymore. It all starts with these very basic exercises, strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your alertness. Each time you catch yourself wandering off and bring yourself back, that may feel frustrating, but it’s a good thing to do. This is how you get stronger. You keep coming back, coming back, coming back. You don’t give in, because you realize this is the sort of training that you have to do for yourself. Nobody else can do it for you. And it doesn’t get easier as you get older. So now is the best time to work on it, because it really does make a difference. It’s all the difference between whether you’re going to suffer or whether you’re not. When aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, when difficult situations come in life, if you just thrash around and blame the difficult situations, you’re not helping the situation. You’re not doing anything at all. You’re making it worse. But if you realize that even when things get difficult, you have the power to change the way you breathe, change the way you think, change the way you label things, change the way you evaluate your situation, the potentials of your situation, so that even in the midst of difficult situations, you can be free from suffering. Because you’re alert and mindful, these qualities have been strengthened. Your powers of discernment see where the best place to focus is, what the best way is to understand the situation. Because you’ve evaluated all the building blocks that you use to create your experience of the present moment, you have a lot of power in your hand. The problem is, we don’t use it properly because of our ignorance. But as you banish ignorance, fight it back, with each and every breath, you can make more use of that power and take it all the way to the end of suffering. That’s what this path promises. But even if you don’t get all the way there, at least you’ve learned that you don’t have to be totally a victim of things. You have the ability to make a difference each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. So keep exercising your mindfulness and alertness to the end of the hour. That’s how you make them strong.

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