Focus on the Doing

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Focus on your breath. It may seem a strange thing to do with your mind. After all, the mind is for thinking. And you could spend the whole hour thinking all kinds of thoughts. But the question is, what would you get out of it? Occasionally you get some use out of your thoughts. Thoughts aren’t all bad. But there’s a lot of thinking that can make you suffer. Many times you may start a train of thinking and not know where it’s going to go. It’s like train hopping. Hop from one train to another to another, and all of a sudden find yourself going off in the opposite direction from where you thought you were going. So what you need to learn is the skill of how to get out of your thoughts. So that if you find yourself on the wrong train, at the very least you can jump off safely. And at the same time, when you can get out of your thoughts, then when the time comes when you really do have to think about something, the mind is in a good shape. It hasn’t been wearing itself out with pointless thoughts, pointless ideas, rambling around, going nowhere. So this is the first step in training the mind so that it doesn’t cause suffering, giving it a place to stay in the present moment. If you’re going to think, think about the breath. In other words, know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out. And not only that, notice how it feels. As the Buddha said, two of the factors of the first jhana, the first step in right concentration, are directed thought and evaluation. So direct your thoughts to the breath and then evaluate it. Make adjustments. Start out with a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how that feels. If it feels good, stick with it. If not, you can change. Make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. There are lots of ways you can adjust the breath. Notice what’s happening, when you get good results and when you don’t. Try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. The more sensitivity you bring to the practice, the more you’re going to notice. The more you notice, the more comfortable you can make it. The more comfortable you can make it, the easier it is to settle down. Staying with the breath is not a difficult process. It becomes more and more home base, so that it feels natural to be here and that thinking is something you do only when you really have to. Otherwise, you come back to home base and just watch. Be sensitive. This also helps you to disidentify from your thoughts, because all too often we get into a thought world and get totally absorbed in it. We don’t really observe what it’s doing to us. But when you learn how to disidentify with your thoughts, you can begin to see thinking as a process. Instead of getting sucked into the content, you see what is this process of creating thoughts in the present moment. How does it happen? What are the steps? At what point does a thought world become compelling? At what point do you decide you’re going to go with a thought world? How does that thought world form to begin with? This is something you can observe only if you’re not totally sucked into the thought world. You’ve got to have a place where you can stand outside. It’s like driving past a movie theater at night, one of those drive-in theaters. If you stop long enough and you start looking at the screen, you begin to see a story. There are people up on the screen. And even if you don’t hear the soundtrack, you can start putting together a story of what’s happening. But if you look at the screen in another way, you realize it’s just flashing colors. There’s nobody up there. There doesn’t have to be a story. It’s only when you supply the storyline that you get sucked in. It’s when a thought arises in the mind. It’s not the fact that you’re a totally passive observer. You’re a participant in creating the thought world. And your creation is what gets you sucked in. You can see this clearly only if you learn how to step out and have a home base that you can return to safely when you step out. So you want to get trained. Many times we read texts about states of enlightenment, high states of concentration, and we’re impatient. We want to go all the way to the end. There’s a Thai phrase, “Ru kon gert,” which means that you know all about something before anything has happened in your meditation. “Lerd kon tham,” which means that you’re already skilled. You know everything before you’ve actually tried doing anything. So you don’t want to get ahead of yourself in the process. You realize that this is a training and it goes step by step by step. The Buddha’s analogy is the continental shelf off of India. There’s a gradual slope before there’s the sudden drop-off. So as part of the gradual slope, there are skills you need to learn. The skill of how to stay with the breath. The skill of how to notice when the mind is beginning to leave the breath. The skill of learning how to bring it back. As for the more subtle insights, you’re not going to see the more subtle things until you’ve really mastered the more blatant ones. And it’s not the case that the more blatant ones you’re working on right now are totally unrelated to the subtle ones. The ability to watch the mind. How are you going to gain insight into the causes of suffering until you’ve learned how to watch your mind wander off, catch it wandering off, and bring it back? Insights into not-self. How are you going to see those insights unless you’ve learned how to begin to disidentify from your thoughts? On the simple way of what you’ve noticed that you’ve wanted off the breath, you come back. Even though it may seem basic and you’re impatient to get on to the higher things, you’re not going to get on to the higher things, the more subtle things, the deeper things, until you’ve gotten really good at the basic ones. It’s like playing a piano. You play those scales over and over and over again and it’s kind of boring. But once you’ve really mastered the scales, it’s going to help you when you play Beethoven or Brahms or something really difficult. So it’s not that you have to master the blatant ones and then you drop them to go on to the more subtle ones. The more subtle ones grow out of the blatant ones. We know about the eightfold path. The texts also talk about a tenfold path. This is the arahants’ path, in addition to the eight factors of the path. There’s right knowledge and right release. We interpret it as real concentration. When the mind finally hits a state of concentration that’s totally unfabricated, it can’t be destroyed, it can’t be affected by anything at all. So it’s working on concentration now. It’s not that you do concentration and then you drop the concentration to move on to insight. The insight lies in learning how to get better and better and better at the concentration. So you can see the subtle ways in which the mind creates suffering, even around the practice of concentration. But you’re not going to see that until you’ve gotten really good at concentration. So approach this as you would any skill. Think of it in terms of a step-by-step-by-step process. And don’t try running ahead or anticipating what’s going to happen next. If you look very carefully at what you’re doing now, that’s how you learn. Sometimes you hear that there’s no distinction between the path and the goal, or that the goal lies in the path. What that means is that you look into the practice of what you’re doing, and that’s where you’re going to find the results. In other words, it’s not that you just slave away at this practice and then the results are going to come someplace else. So it’s not that you’re here working on the practice with one eye to see when those results are going to hit you from outside. It’s in paying full attention to what you’re doing. That’s when you start seeing the more subtle things in the mind. This is what intentness is, what they call the basis of power, the basis of success in the practice, that you really give yourself totally to what you’re doing. Then the others work around this. In other words, there’s desire, the desire to really want to do it well. Of course, you also really want results. But again, where are you going to see the results unless you want to do the practice? So you have to learn how to talk yourself into liking this. And the more subtle your powers of observation with the breath, your ability to adjust the breath, make it more comfortable, until it reaches a point where you really don’t have to adjust it anymore. It feels really good coming in, really good going out, and you settle down with that, stick with that. When you learn how to sensitize yourself to the breath this way, it becomes easier and easier to want to keep doing it again. The path itself becomes enjoyable. People often forget that. The Buddha talks about the four noble truths. It all sounds very negative, suffering. But it’s only the first two factors that may even sound negative. There’s the last two, the end of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering. The path to the end of suffering includes right concentration, which includes rapture, pleasure, strong, solid states of equanimity, both physical pleasure and mental pleasure. When you’ve learned how to tap into that skill, then the desire to practice becomes more strongly based. And the path becomes enjoyable in and of itself. As it becomes enjoyable, then the second basis for power is persistence. It’s more constant, more reliable. You want to keep at it. This doesn’t mean just going off and meditating, closing your eyes and abandoning the rest of the world. It means you carry your practice into everything you do. Learn how to be centered and mindful. With a sense of ease of body and ease of mind in all your activities. That’s why we not only do sitting meditation, we do walking meditation. This is why here at the monastery people are not just sitting and walking, but you’re also doing chores around the monastery. You learn how to carry this sense of ease and well-being through all kinds of activities. That’s what it means to be persistent. You just stick with it, stick with it, but you’re working at pleasure, working at well-being. The fourth basis for power is using your powers of analysis. When things are going well, notice that and try to notice why they’re going well. Also notice if you’re analyzing too much, if it destroys your concentration, you drop that for the time being. Things aren’t going well, again, try to analyze it. See what’s going on. Divide everything into basic elements. How’s your focus? How’s the breath doing in different parts of the body? Are you focusing on the right spot? How about changing to another spot? What kind of attitudes are you carrying into the meditation? Try to notice that as well. If you’re coming to the meditation all flustered, stop and ask yourself why you’re flustered. If you’re upset at somebody, think about why you want to carry that in. What’s the source of your being upset? Sometimes you have to analyze things a little bit before you’re ready to sit down and meditate to get yourself in the proper mood, to develop the proper attitude. So when things aren’t going well, try to break everything down. Don’t just say, “My meditation is going poorly,” and think of it as one huge monolith that you can’t do anything about. Break it down into its component factors. There’s the way you’re focusing, there’s the way the breath is going, there’s the place where you’re focusing, the concept you have of the breath. Sometimes we have weird ideas, sort of cartoon ideas, about how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out, and we try to breathe in line with those cartoon ideas, and it goes against the actual way the breath could flow easily in, easily out. Think of the breath coming in and out of the whole body, through all your pores, as a way of releasing some of the tension that we tend to add to the breathing process because of our cartoon ideas. These are the four things that bring success in the meditation. Sometimes we’re told not to think about success. Basically what that means is don’t think about success and failure in unskillful ways. Try to develop a skillful attitude towards what it means to succeed in the meditation. Bring these qualities of the desire to do the practice, the persistence you bring to the practice, the intentness on focusing on the causes, being confident that the effects will come if the causes are right, and finally noticing if the effects aren’t coming the way you want them to, then come back and analyze things down, break things down. As Ajahn Furing once noted, those seven steps in Ajahn Lee’s instructions on breath meditation are a good checklist. If the meditation doesn’t seem to be going well, then ask yourself, “Are you really focusing on the breath?” How about the way the breath feels in the different parts of the body? Are you allowing the breath energy to flow properly? How about where you’re sitting? Are you seated in a spot that’s congenial? Does it feel good there? How about the rhythm of the breath? Are you able to allow all the different breath sensations in the body to flow together? Does it feel like some parts of the body are fighting against other parts of the body? You break the meditation down into those questions and you begin to see areas where you might try to change things if things aren’t going well. These are some of the attitudes to bring to the meditation. Notice the focus here is on doing the practice, and when it goes well, you don’t have to anticipate the results in order to make them come. It’s what you’re doing right now that makes all the difference. Ask for distracting thoughts to come up. Again, there are many different ways you can deal with them. In some cases, all you have to do is just look at them and let them go. Notice that you’re distracted and go back to the breath, and that’s it. Other times it doesn’t work. The mind keeps getting pulled back, pulled back, pulled back. Sometimes it’s thoughts of remorse over the past. Sometimes it’s worries about the future. It’s remorse over the past. Remind yourself that remorse in the present moment is not going to accomplish anything. It’s not the case that if you beat yourself up enough over your past mistakes that future punishment is not going to happen. It’s a child’s attitude. Instead, remind yourself that what was done in the past was done in the past, but what you’re doing right now is important. Developing powers of concentration, developing your discernment, your sensitivity to what you’re doing in the present moment, this is what gives you a lot of power. You have a better chance to do things skillfully in the future as well and to be able to handle any results of past bad karma that may be lying in wait. So no matter what thought you have, there’s a way of thinking about it to realize that it’s more in your own true self-interest and the interest of the people around you that you come back to your breath, come back to your meditation object and be really sensitive about it. Other times, when there are distracting thoughts, you realize that, okay, they may be in the background, but you don’t have to focus on them. You don’t have to get involved. They can be nibbling away at one corner of your mind, but you can be in another corner. After a while, if you don’t pay them any attention, they just go away. So when distracting thoughts arise in the body, there’s going to be a subtle change in the breath energy in different parts of the body. If you can sense that, notice the tension and allow it to relax, the thought has no foundation. It goes away. Again, getting the mind to settle down doesn’t mean you’re just beating it down or tying it down to the breath. Sometimes you have to approach it using your intelligence, using your powers of analysis. You have to use some strategies that can get around the pull of your distracting thoughts. In doing this, in developing all the various skills that are required to get the mind to stay solidly with the breath, you’re learning a lot about the mind and how to deal with issues in the mind a lot more skillfully. This is where insight comes. Insight of someone mastering a skill, not of someone who’s memorized a text or can impose something you’ve read someplace onto your experience and say, “Yes, I can see it from that point of view.” It’s more the insight that comes when you realize, “Oh, I’ve been doing this and it’s not skillful.” And there’s an alternative way to do it that causes less suffering, that causes less stress. So it’s in the doing that the insight comes. The intention you’re working on here is the intention to get the mind to settle down with more salinity, a greater sense of ease. And you attend to the process. The attention you bring to the process is to see what you’re doing that’s not quite skillful yet, what you can improve on. It’s this insight into intention and attention. Those are the main factors that normally come out of ignorance, but now you’re doing them with knowledge. You’re doing them with clarity. And the more clear you are about these factors, the less suffering you’re going to cause. So focus on the doing of the concentration. Focus on doing it well. And the insights that you want will develop naturally.

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