The Best Use of Your Time

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The mind is so used to having a long list of things that it has to think about or prepare for that it’s a special luxury to have some time where you can put the list aside and focus on one thing—the training of the mind itself. So try to make the most of this opportunity. Focus on your breath, and beware of the process of breathing starting out throughout the whole body. If that’s too much, you can focus on one spot—the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat—anywhere in the body where you can sense that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. The breath here is not just the air coming in and out the nostrils. It’s the whole process of the energy flow that brings the air in and then lets it go out. So anywhere you notice the feeling of the breathing, you can focus right there. Try to set up the intention that you’re going to stay right there as well. After a couple breaths, other intentions will come up. You want to think about this. You want to remember that, plan for this, whatever. And you have to remind yourself that you’ve set up this one intention to train the mind. So you bring the mind back to the breath and just keep doing that until somehow you get the message that this is an important place to stay. It may not seem like much. You can think of all kinds of other important issues that you might be planning for right now. So you need good reasons to remind yourself why you’re staying here. One is that the mind really does need to be trained. You’ve probably seen lots of instances of people who have a lot of power and a lot of money and really misuse the power and misuse the money. They end up harming themselves and the people around them. And why do they do this? Because the mind isn’t trained. So even the goods of the world are not necessarily good. It depends on the goodness of the mind. Goodness here meaning that you have control over your thinking because you understand where your thinking can lead. Thinking has consequences. Your ideas have consequences. They can lead to benefit or harm. And if the mind is left to its own devices, if it stays untrained, it’s like an animal that hasn’t been trained. It can’t do any work. Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it leaves a mess all over the house. It’s only when it’s trained that you can actually get some real good out of it. It’s the same with the mind. The mind has to learn how to put its thoughts aside when it sees that they’re going in the wrong direction. This is one of the basic definitions of wisdom. Realizing that things you do and say and think have consequences. And that sometimes things that you like to do or say or think can have unfortunate consequences. And things that you don’t like to do or say or think can actually have good consequences. Wisdom lies in your ability to go for the good consequences and avoid the bad, no matter how much you like or dislike the causes. That requires training. That requires maturity. So we’re trying to mature the mind here. So when you find the mind that’s slipping off to something else, the ideal cure is just to pull it back to the breath. Let the breath be comfortable. Use the breath as a lure. It’s your carrot. You’re staying in the present moment. You can breathe in any kind of way. You can breathe long in, long out, short in, short out, long in and short out, short in, long out, heavy or light, fast or slow, deep or shallow, any way that feels good right now. That’s the carrot that pulls you into the present moment. Realizing simply paying attention to the way you breathe can relieve a lot of stress in the body. You can think of the breath as a whole body process. It permeates down to your fingers and your toes. And the way you breathe can relieve a lot of the stress that you tend to carry around in the body. People go to chiropractors and osteopaths and other bodywork professionals to get rid of a lot of stress. And a lot of that stress you can actually get out of your body simply by breathing. Maybe not everything, but you can clear up a lot of the stress that you’re carrying around simply by breathing in a way that feels good all the way down inside. But sometimes the carrot isn’t enough. The mind keeps going back to certain ways of thinking, so you have to remind yourself. You’ve spent the hour thinking about those things. Where would it take you? Do you really need a whole hour to think about those things? Many times, it’s a pattern of thinking you’ve been through many, many times before, like old movies on the movie channel. You know what the characters are going to say, and yet you still watch the old movies. Yet most of the movies in your mind are not the sort of thing you’d actually pay money to see. So why bother with them? And again, where do these thoughts lead? Many of them lead to really unfortunate things. You get thinking about greed or lust or anger, and they end up causing you to do all kinds of things that you later regret. So remind yourself you’ve got better things to do with your time. Because the way you let the mind go, the things that you return to again and again, those create ruts in the mind. Those neural pathways get well-traveled, and they get more and more ingrained. They become more and more second nature. So you’ve got to be careful about what you’re training yourself in. Are you training yourself in greed, anger, and delusion? Or are you training yourself in mindfulness and alertness? You’re constantly making these choices, whether you realize them or not. So that kind of thinking is the stick, to remind yourself that you’ve got something better to do. Though the results of the meditation may not appear immediately, they build up over time. You strengthen your mindfulness, in other words, the ability to keep the breath in mind, and strengthen your alertness, your ability to see what you’re doing and the consequences of what you’re doing. You can apply these strength and qualities to any aspect of life, and you find that you benefit. Because the skill of a trained mind underlies all the other skills you can develop, whether physical skills or mental skills. The discipline that’s required to keep the mind on one object and to be very observant applies to every activity in life that you want to follow. So the work you do, keeping the mind with the breath, keeping the breath in mind and observing the breath, has all sorts of good applications. So you’ve got the hour to work on training the mind. Remember, as the Buddha once said, the difference between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person realizes the need to train the mind. The fool doesn’t realize it. He thinks that other things outside will bring happiness. The wise person realizes that the trained mind is the source of happiness. When your mind is well-trained, then no matter what outside circumstances are like, you can find a way to be happy. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha sent his monks out in the forest, partly because it’s quiet and it’s a good place to observe your mind, but also because there are bugs and there are all kinds of disagreeable animals and other things going on out there. It can be hot, it can be cold, and you can sit there being miserable about it. Or you can decide, “Okay, I’m going to find where the opportunities for happiness are here,” and you find that they lie inside. That kind of environment forces you to focus on the potentials of the mind. Here we’re in a much more pleasant environment. There are some drawbacks. No place is perfect. But the opportunity for happiness is always here. It comes from the fact that the opportunity to make skillful choices is always there. So do your best for the hour to make a skillful choice each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, to stay with the breath, to be more sensitive to the breath, more observant about the breath, and to maximize the potential for happiness that lies within each of us. Make the best use of your time.

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