Proactive Mindfulness

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Focus on your breath. Where do you feel the breath right now? It might be at the tip of the nose where you feel the air coming in and going out, or it could be in any part of the body that moves as you breathe in, moves as you breathe out. The rising of the chest, the rising of the head, the rising of the abdomen, any place where the movement of energy in the body tells you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out,” you can focus there. Try to make your focus just right. In other words, don’t clench up around that part of the body. Because if you do, then the breathing process starts getting uncomfortable and the mind isn’t going to want to stay there. It’ll want to move around, get away, think about other things, do other things. So whatever spot in the body you’re focused on, think of the breath energy flowing in, flowing out naturally, with nothing to obstruct it. At the same time, don’t let your focus be so weak that you just keep slipping off. You want to maintain continual focus. In Pali, this is called anubhasana, sticking with something, keeping track of something, continually, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, all the way through the spaces in between. That’s how you establish mindfulness. It’s in the establishing of mindfulness that good qualities in the mind begin to grow. You’re basically bringing in three qualities here—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, you’re keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. It’s not just a passive observing of whatever happens. It’s a huge misunderstanding that you hear almost everywhere. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Particularly if it’s right mindfulness, you keep in mind the fact that you want to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Once you’ve developed them, you want to keep remembering to stay there. This is reflected in the way the Buddha describes the first steps of mindfulness of breathing. You start out by simply being aware of whether the breath is short, whether it’s long. The third step is to be aware of the whole body. You train yourself to do this. It’s not going to happen naturally. Once you’ve been able to maintain your focus on that one spot, then you try to expand your range of awareness so it fills the whole body, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. This requires some training. Some people find it hard to maintain both the focus and this broadened awareness. One way to work toward it is to move your focus around deliberately. Stay with, say, the center of the chest for a while and then move down to the abdomen, or start at the abdomen and move up the center line in the front of the body. The stomach, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head, and then down the back, out the legs, then starting at the back of the neck and going down the arms. In other words, systematically go through the body and maintain your focus on the different parts of the body so you can learn how to be sensitive to the whole body, any part of the body, while you’re breathing in, while you’re breathing out. Notice how those different parts of the body feel. If you’re really sensitive, you’ll begin to notice that with each in-and-out breath there’s going to be a subtle flow of energy throughout the whole nervous system. It goes very fast and it’s very subtle. But if you pay careful attention, you’ll see it. Now, in the course of doing this, you’ll find that what they call the breath channels in the body, the energy flow in the body, gets opened up. When the energy flow throughout the body gets opened up, then the need for heavy breathing gets reduced. This takes you to the fourth step, which is to train yourself to calm the breath as you breathe in, calm the breath as you breathe out. In other words, you begin to notice that you have a lot of preconceived notions about what you have to do in order to get the breath to come in, what you have to do in order to get it to go out, and you begin to realize you don’t have to do all those things. It’s like a young child learning how to walk. In the beginning, the child is going to move its arms, move its head, all kinds of different parts of the body, because it hasn’t figured out which muscles are necessary and which ones aren’t. But over time, you begin to notice that you don’t have to move your head so much, you don’t have to move your arms so much. It’s just the legs. And the walking becomes easier. The same with the breath. You begin to realize that the different cartoon notions you have of what you have to do in order to get the breath in, what you have to do in order to get it to come out, are really not all that important. They’re not all that accurate. You begin to sense the breath as a whole body process. So when you breathe in, there’s energy coming in through all the pores, which means it requires less pumping of the lungs. These are things you train yourself to do. You don’t just sit and watch it happen. You train yourself in this direction, which is part of right mindfulness. There’s a passage where the Buddha says the duty of right mindfulness is to remember to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. Alertness means watching what’s going on, being aware of what’s happening as it’s happening. Ardency means trying to do all this skillfully. In other words, when you begin to see that what’s happening is not skillful, then you decide to make it more skillful. You do your best. You develop the desire to make it more skillful. Sometimes we hear that desire is a bad thing in the practice, but it plays an important role in right effort. You have to want to do it right if it’s going to happen. If you don’t want it to do it right, it may happen a little bit, but it’s not really going to happen continually. So you develop this desire. These are the skillful qualities you want to develop, you want to bring to the breath. And as you bring them to the breath and stick with it, they do develop, they grow. The path is something to develop, to work at. We’re doing some work here, but it’s work in pleasure. There’s a sense of ease that can come when you feel like the whole body is breathing in, the whole body is breathing out, and all the muscles throughout the body can stay relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. There’s a sense of ease. There’s a sense of fullness. So even though it’s work, there are immediate rewards once you tap into learning how to do it right. In the beginning, though, it may not quite happen right. There can be a sense of frustration, a sense of impatience. But frustration and impatience don’t create things. They don’t make them happen. You put in an effort, but you put in the effort skillfully. In other words, you just stick with it and don’t try to anticipate when it’s going to happen. You just keep doing it. It’s planting a crop. You sow the seeds, the plants begin to grow, and you’d like to have them grow faster, but if you try to pull on them or stretch them to make them grow faster, they die. So you can’t pull the plant. What you do is that you just keep watering the plants, tending to the soil, and trust that they’ll grow of their own accord. And they do. It’s the same with the meditation. The steps are simple, but we tend to make things more complex by anticipation or impatience, wanting to get the results right away. We have to make the causes right, and then once the causes are right, then the results will come. So pay careful attention to these three things—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Those are the factors that will help the concentration to grow. So just apply these qualities to this breath and then to this breath. Don’t think about how many breaths you’ve breathed so far, and don’t think about how many more you’re going to have to breathe for the rest of the hour. Just focus on doing things right for each breath as it comes. The skillful qualities we’re working on will develop of their own accord. So you are taking a proactive role, but you have to learn how to be skillful in being proactive. Think about other skills you’ve developed in the past, and the qualities of mind that you brought to the skill, whether it was playing a musical instrument or learning to be a carpenter or playing a sport. There’s that element of desire to get the results, but you realize that if all you think about is the results you want without focusing on what you’re doing, it’s not going to happen. You have to learn how to focus very precisely on what you’re doing and remembering to do it right. Then, through trial and error, learn how to understand exactly what “right” is. It’s those same qualities that will get results here.

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