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Meditation is all about observing. Observing what’s going on in the body, observing what’s going on in the mind. And there’s a skill in learning how to observe properly. Because it’s possible to look at the body and mind and come away with all kinds of weird ideas. This is why the Buddha put right view at the beginning of the path, to direct your attention to what’s important. Right view comes on two levels. First, there’s the view that’s convinced that your actions really are important, your intentions are important, because what you intend determines what you’re going to do. What you’re going to say, what you’re going to think, these have an impact now and on into the future, which is determined by the quality of the intention. If it’s harmless, you’re fine. If it’s harmful, then you’ve got a problem. So that’s one area where you have to look. What are your intentions right now? Then the second level of right view has to do with the issue of suffering and stress. It divides the issues that you really want to look into into four. First, where is there suffering and stress right now? What’s the cause? What can you do to put an end to that suffering? And what is it like for the mind not to suffer at all? Those are the four things you want to look into, and each of them has a duty, each of them has a task. When you notice there’s stress or suffering, you want to try to comprehend it. When you see the cause, you want to let it go. As for the qualities of mind that put an end to suffering, those are the ones you want to develop so you can actually realize or verify for yourself that there is such a thing as the end of suffering. So that’s the framework. Basically, attention and intention. The fact that your intentions are important and that you also have to attend to the right things. And not simply watch, but also figure out what to do in response. So that’s the framework within which you’re trying to observe things. Among those qualities you’ve got to develop are mindfulness and concentration. Right mindfulness helps keep you focused, helps you keep remembering what you’re supposed to be doing. And concentration gives you a stability, the stability you need in order to watch things as they’re actually happening. Because it’s a basic principle in any kind of experiment. Suppose you have a scientific experiment that’s got all sorts of measuring apparatus on a table. You want to make sure the table is solid, that the table doesn’t move, doesn’t wobble. If it wobbles, then all the things you’re trying to measure are going to be out of whack. The measuring apparatus won’t be reliable. So you’ve got to make your mind as solid as possible, as steady as possible. This is how meditation is like science. You set up some questions, and then you want to look and see how you can answer the questions by being very careful in your observations. This doesn’t mean you’re mechanical. There are some meditation techniques that claim to be scientific, and it’s basically more mechanical than anything else. Just put the mind through the grinder, put it through the assembly line, and it’s supposed to come out guaranteed, awakening at the end of the assembly line. But that’s not what science is all about. Science is more about learning how to ask a question, frame a problem in your mind, and then figure out how to watch phenomena, how to measure phenomena, how to manipulate phenomena, to see if you can understand what’s connected to what. Simply watching things or simply putting the mind through a particular method doesn’t show you the connection between cause and effect. If you want to see cause and effect, you try manipulating different things. For example, if you want to see the effect of the breath on the mind, you play with the breath. So in addition to keeping the mind steady, you want to have this element of play, asking yourself, “Well, how about this? Let’s try this. How about that? Let’s try that.” I think it was Kurt Vonnegut one time who said that scientists are basically little kids who are paid by the government to continue playing—paid by industry, paid by whoever, academic institutions. Even as they’re adults, they’re still paid to be little kids to get to play around. There should be that element of play in the meditation, otherwise it gets dull, it gets boring, and it lacks the alertness that you’re going to need in order to observe what’s connected to what. Because that’s what Right View is all about. You’ve got to see how stress is connected to its cause. If you don’t see the connection, there’s no way you can put an end to stress and suffering. So you start out by playing with the breath and watching it connect. You watch it continually. That’s where the steadiness of concentration comes in. As we were saying earlier today, if your attention isn’t continuous, your awareness of the world is like connect-the-dots. There’s a little splotch over here, a little splotch over there, all sorts of little splotches. But you don’t see the connections between them, so the mind tends to draw the lines itself. So whatever shapes you see have very little to do with what’s actually going on there, and they have more to do with the kind of shapes you tend to see and things. Then you decide, well, some splotches are more important than others. That’s what attention is all about, deciding what’s important and what’s not. So no matter what the splotches are, you can make an airplane out of them. No matter where the dots are, you can make an airplane by choosing to ignore some dots and connect some dots to other ones, regardless of how they’re actually connected. So to get past that, you have to learn how to sit with things continually. That’s where you want to be. You want to develop the qualities of concentration. So when you notice that the mind is being mindful and it seems to be settling down, you don’t want to just simply watch it arise and pass away. If it does arise and pass away, then you want to notice, well, exactly why is this happening? Because eventually you want to understand it well enough so you can figure out how to make it stay and grow. That’s the development of the path. So to observe these things, you have to realize there are skills. There’s a foundation for the observing. Simply giving you a method and saying, “Just follow this method from A to Z, and we’re going to guarantee that you’re going to be awakened.” That’s not going to guarantee that you’re going to see anything. The seeing comes from, one, learning how to watch things continually, and two, learning how to ask the right questions. Figure out what’s important to notice and what you can put a sign to. That’s what makes meditation scientific. Because you look at the history of science, it’s not a matter simply of knowledge very gradually building one block on the next, on the next, on the next. It goes around. People get interested in a particular question for a while and follow it as far as seems to be interesting or useful. And then after a while they decide, “Well, there’s another series of questions that’s more interesting, more useful.” And so it’s the questions you ask that are as important as the method you follow. So those questions, “What’s stress here? Where is the stress right now? What’s the cause? What can I do to make the mind more observant so I can actually see the connection between the two?” Those are the questions you want to bring. And then the mindfulness and the concentration are meant to put you in a position where you can really watch and see what’s going on. And the two get combined. There’s a faculty of evaluation in the first jhana. You don’t have to work wait for the first jhana in order to use it. Evaluation means looking at what’s there and then playing around with it a little bit to see what’s comfortable, to see what’s conducive to getting the mind to settle down, to a place where it feels at ease. So this is the aspect of right view or the aspect of appropriate attention that’s brought into the concept of concentration. We begin with the breath, because the breath is a lot easier to observe than the mind in and of itself, or mental events in and of themselves. So we experiment with the breath. How does long breathing feel? How does short breathing feel? Deep breathing? Where do you focus your attention when you’re focusing on the breath? Which spot in the body seems most conducive? Before settling down, is one spot not enough? Okay, try two. Sometimes you’ll find that the body presents its own issues. Say, when you’ve got headaches or backaches or something doesn’t feel quite right with the body. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would be good for your physical condition right now, and see how the body responds. Sometimes just asking the question gives a deeper part of your awareness permission to assert itself, something it might have been blocked from because you were pursuing something else, more interested in something else, and you weren’t giving the body the opportunity to breathe in a way that felt really good. You may notice this as you’re saying you’ve got a problem in your life and you’re just focusing on that problem over and over and over again. That’s where all your attention goes, and so the body’s freedom to breathe easily gets compromised because you’re placing the problem over the needs of the body right now. If this keeps up, this is why people who are worried continually or have nervous conditions physically get really out of sorts, because the body doesn’t have permission to breathe in a way that’s healthy. So, while you’re meditating, put those other issues aside. Say, this is the time for the breath to do its thing. Suppose that question in the mind. If you’ve only got a headache coming on, or a backache, or you know that there’s something in your body that’s not functioning quite right, ask yourself what kind of breathing would be best right now. See how the body responds. Now, there’s no guarantee that its first response is actually going to be the right one. This, again, is an area where you have to start observing. If you start hyperventilating, that’s a sign that you’re so out of touch with your body that you can’t even trust it right away. So say, “Calm down, calm down.” Then try other ways of breathing until you begin to reestablish a sense of communication. Then, as you get more and more familiar with learning how to breathe, the breath, as Ajahn Lee says, the breath is like a mirror for the mind. You begin to see the movements of the mind, which movements are healthy, which movements are not. As you become more sensitive to the breath, it increases your power to sensitivity. Then you can apply those movements more and more to events in the mind. The questions are always the same. Where is there unnecessary stress here? What’s the cause? How can I look at that? How can I observe it? How can I sit with it in such a way that you develop the qualities that enable you to understand the stress and to let go of the cause? Starting with the breath and then moving into events in the mind. That’s how you start seeing new things in the meditation. Things that have been there all along, but you didn’t see them before because other issues were blocking them. So this is how meditation enables you to see the entire picture in a useful way. It’s not that you’re open to everything. You still have a specific agenda in mind. This is what Right View does. It points you in the area for putting an end to suffering, which is the big issue. So you’re not just going to be sitting here with pure awareness or bare awareness in and of itself. There is a direction, but it’s a useful direction that has been proven again and again and again over the centuries. These are the right questions if you want to put an end to suffering. When you learn how to ask the right questions and use the right approach in learning how to observe, i.e., being mindful of the body in and of itself, or feelings, or the mind, or mental qualities, and using that framework as your focus for getting the mind to settle down and be steady and still so you can watch things from the beginning to end. That’s how you get to the end of suffering. The lines that connect to the dots are the ones that actually are useful in putting an end to suffering. As for other lines, which may be there, you realize they’re not necessary right now. Take care of the issue of suffering first, the issue of stress in the mind, and then if you have time after that, then you can play around with other lines. But in the meantime, make sure that you see these connections, because these are the ones that are really important. It’s like that old analogy of being shot with an arrow. You could ask about, “Where was this arrow made? What kind of wood is it made of? What kind of feathers? Who made it?” But then, of course, you could die first. So make sure you get the arrow out. Once it’s out, then if you have time, then you can study the arrow. But focus first on the skills that will remove it. That’s when the meditation gives its best results.

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