Opening the Dhamma Eye

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Two qualities are essential as you try to bring the mind to concentration. The first is mindfulness. The second is alertness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. You remember it. The object that you’re going to focus on, and you just keep remembering. Alertness is the actual watching what’s going on. This is the quality you have to develop as much as possible. Without it, you won’t notice when mindfulness has lapsed. You just wander off and end up who knows where. You have to notice the fact that the mind is leaving the object, the mind has left the object, and you have to figure out what ways work to bring it back. If you bring it back with harshness, the mind is going to be less and less likely to want to come back. If you’re lackadaisical in bringing it back, you’re not going to really develop anything in the meditation. So you have to be persistent, just keep coming back, coming back, and developing the right attitude as you come back. This means that alertness involves not only noticing what happens, but also noticing what works. What ways of relating to the breath are useful? What ways of coming back to the breath are helpful? And what do you look for to notice when the mind is leaving the object? When it’s slipping off. So you can catch it before it actually goes. There are some warning signals. As you get a little bored with the breath and something inside you says, “I’d like something else.” If you’re not alert, you’re not going to notice that. Because once you’ve set up the formal decision that you’re going to stay with the breath, everything that goes against that formal decision is going to have to work behind the scenes. And your mind has plenty of behind-the-scenes, all sorts of screens, all sorts of walls that you can set up. So the part of the mind or the decisions that want to go someplace else can operate in secrecy. There’s a certain dishonesty in the mind. And it’s important in your meditation that you acknowledge that fact and learn how to work around it, learning how to see through those walls. There’s a third quality, persistence, which is what actually strengthens the mindfulness and strengthens the alertness. In other words, as soon as you realize you’ve slipped off, you come right back. The extra word that’s used in the Sutta on establishing mindfulness is ardency, that you really give your heart to what you’re doing, to observing, to trying to be mindful. Try to strengthen these qualities. These qualities, actually, are more important than any particular technique that you might use. This is one of the reasons why the forest tradition doesn’t have a forest tradition technique. And one of the closest things we do have to a technique is that John Lee’s system of breath meditation leaves a lot to your own powers of judgment, asking you to notice what kind of breathing feels good. And even though his seven steps give specific directions on how to spread the comfortable feeling of the breath through the body, you look at his Dhamma talks and the lots of other ways of doing it as well. You can explore and see, if that doesn’t work for you, what would be another way of spreading the breath? What does it mean to spread the breath? What does it mean to spread the sense of ease? How can you tell when you’re pushing it too hard? How can you tell when you’re not letting it spread widely enough? These are things that you’ve got to learn how to observe for yourself. It’s the quality of being observant. That’s what you’re working on in the meditation. That’s why we have the technique. There’s no technique that’s going to awaken you. There are techniques that you can use to help sharpen your powers of observation. And it’s your powers of observation that are actually going to bring about the awakening. So you’ve got to learn how to judge the results of your meditation. You may hear that there’s no such thing as a good or bad meditation. And in the beginning, they say that so that you don’t jump too quickly to conclusions. But there has to come a point where you begin to realize that some meditations work better than others. Some sessions work better than others. Some techniques work better than others. Instead of having just one technique, you begin to realize that you’ve got to have a whole series of techniques. This is why the Buddha, when teaching how to deal with distractions, set out at least five. And these are just five large categories. One is when you notice that the mind has wandered off into something unskillful and just bring it back to a more skillful topic, i.e., your topic of meditation. Noting practices would fall under this. But if you find that the mind keeps going back, back, back to a particular topic, you realize that simply noting it or simply being aware of it and trying to bring it back to the breath is not going to work. You’ve got to start thinking about the drawbacks. If you were to think that thought for a whole day, where would it take you? What kind of qualities would develop? And do you really want to think that thought? How many times have you already thought that thought? Most of the stuff that we wander off to is old, chewed-over bones, things that we’ve gnawed at for years and years or days and months, old issues that we bring out again. If that thought were a movie, would you pay to see it? Well, no. So why bother with it? You’ve got better things to do. When you can think in that way, it makes it easier to drop the thought. Then you go back to the breath. If the thought is really persistent, even if you analyze it in this way, you may decide simply to just let it think on its own, but you don’t have to get involved. Think of it as a conversation between crazy people. You don’t want to get involved in that. They’ll pull you in and they’ve got you for hours. So let them just talk off in the corner while you come back to the breath. That chattering of the mind actually does not have to destroy your concentration. It certainly doesn’t destroy your breath. The breath is still coming in, going out. You can focus on it. Think of the mind as a committee. A couple committee members are getting into a strange conversation, but you don’t have to move on with them. Or you may notice that when you think, those distracting thoughts are going to be patterns of tension in the body that correspond with them. So we relax those patterns of tension. This is one of the reasons why working with the breath throughout the body is so important, because it sensitizes you to the slight patterns of tension that can form, say, in your hands or in your feet, in your side, in your neck, that correspond to a particular thought. When you catch that, you just relax it, and the thought will go. The last tool in the toolbox is when you realize that none of these techniques are working, so you simply grit your teeth and make up your mind, “I will not think that thought,” just through sheer willpower. Just crushing it with your intent. Jam the circuits. You might want to use the word bhutto really fast. Just think bhutto, bhutto, bhutto. Think of every cell in your body shouting out bhutto, bhutto, bhutto to jam the circuits. Just do that for a while, and then let up and see if the mind is still interested in that thought. Usually it won’t be. There are lots of different ways that you can deal with distractions, and those are just general categories. Within each of those categories, you can have a specific approach. John Lee’s technique of working with the breath so it’s really comfortable makes it a lot easier to follow that first approach, which is to give the mind something better to think about. As long as it’s going to think, we’ll think about the breath. If you’re worried about the future, but you remind yourself that if you’re worn down and distracted, how are you going to deal well with the future, no matter how much you plan? There’s no way you can really know what’s going to happen. But you know that if you put your mind and body in a good shape, you’ll be in better shape to deal with whatever comes up. So here you’re breathing in comfortably, breathing out comfortably. It’s good for the body, soothing for the mind. That helps to anchor you in the present moment. It’s meant to develop your powers of observation. None of these techniques is going to do all the work for you. After all, you have to observe which one is working and which one is not at any particular time. This is important, because when we talk about meditating, the first stage of awakening that we’re aiming at is called the arising of the Dhamma-I. What does the Dhamma-I see? All things that are caused by their nature pass away by their nature. Sometimes it’s simply translated as, “Whatever arises, passes away.” But that’s not what the Buddha’s talking about. Anybody can see things arising and passing away. The important connection is that anything that you are focused on that is caused is going to cease. So it’s not just noticing things arising, but you have to notice whether there’s a connection here. What’s causing it? Because if the cause causes the result to arise, then when the cause is gone, that will eventually cause the result to pass away. Why is this important? Because there are a lot of things in the mind that we assume to be just there permanently, solidly, something you can depend on. Things outside that we tend to depend on, even though we may know consciously that they’re going to end. We tend to block that out. The same goes for states of mind. They’re all dependent on causes, so they’re going to pass away. Can you depend on them? If your happiness depends on them, you’re in bad shape. So what you’re looking for is something that is not caused. This is why simply getting into strong states of concentration or states of jhana does not guarantee awakening, because those too are caused. You’ve got to see the causes. Some people say, “Oh, they’re totally uncaused. They’re totally unintended. They just happen.” Well, if they just happen, it means you’re not observing how they happen, because they depend on causes. As the Buddha said, this jhana concentration is something you develop, you work on. It’s got to have causes for it to be developed. It’s a state of becoming in the mind, and all states of becoming have their causes and clinging and craving. So you’ve got to see those causal relationships. So that’s the Buddhist technique. He gets you totally dependent on these nice states of concentration. It pulls the rug out from under you. But it’s not so you stumble and fall. It’s so that you find something that’s not caused. You use states of concentration as something you cling to, and then, clinging to those states of concentration, you begin to see other attachments that are grosser, involve more stress, and you realize, “Why would I want to hang on to that?” So the state of concentration helps you let go. You let go of the grosser states, particularly of your attachment to sensual pleasures. It’s always amazing how people, teaching meditation, will talk about the dangers of jhana, but they keep forgetting to talk about the dangers of sensuality, which are much greater. The Buddha never talks about jhana as being dangerous, except that ultimately, if you hang on to that without being observant, that’s going to get in the way of awakening. But sensuality has a lot more dangers than that. If you hang on to sensuality, you’re not going to awaken. In the meantime, what do people do based on sensuality? They steal. They cheat. They lie. They break all the precepts. They kill. They wage war. I recently encountered someone who was complaining about some of the Buddha’s discourses talking about the dangers and drawbacks of sensuality. He said, “Gee, why does he have to be so graphic?” Well, it’s because the dangers are there. They are blatant, and yet we turn such a blind eye to them. When you’ve got something better to hold on to, then you’re in a better mood to actually look at those dangers and realize, “I don’t want to go there.” It gets easier to let them go. Then, as you get more and more dependent on states of concentration for your happiness, you realize that they too have their drawbacks. They too are impermanent. They are caused. You start looking for the causes of your concentration. You let them go. That’s when the mind opens to something uncaused. You don’t see the truth of all things that are caused passing away unless you’ve encountered something that isn’t caused and doesn’t pass away. That’s the opening of the Dhamma eye. As I said, it’s not going to be opened by any particular technique. It’s going to be opened by developing our powers of observation. This is why one of the distinguishing factors of the forest tradition is not so much a technique of meditation, but it’s that pushing the student to learn to be more and more observant. All my time with the Chan Fuen, there were a lot of instances where I was supposed to do something, but he wouldn’t explain how it should be done. He would tell me when I was not doing it well. But he wouldn’t explain what the right way to do it would be. I’d have to figure that out. And many times I’d have to observe when I wasn’t doing it right. Sometimes he’d sit there and let it happen for a while and then point out the fact that for a couple of months I hadn’t been observing something that was blatantly obvious. So, of course, what that does is it makes you more alert all around you. What else have I not been observing? The principle being that if you aren’t observant of things that are right before your eyes, how are you going to see things that are happening in your mind? They’re a lot more subtle. That’s why here in the monastery not everything is explained. You’re asked to observe. You’re asked to watch. If you’re not sure, you can ask questions. So this is the quality that’s required for a good meditator, the willingness to be observant, the willingness to question your assumptions. You don’t just say, “Well, this looks like that, therefore it must be that.” Well, maybe it’s not. The desire to learn is what underlies the opening of the Dhamma Eye. The desire to be observant, to understand what’s causing what, what’s happening, what are the connections around here. You want to learn to look for those. As John Fruin used to say, one of his terms of criticism was that somebody always had to have things explained to them. He would say that in frustration. People didn’t know how to look, see what was happening, figure things out. Sometimes he’d say to me, “I hear you’ve been here a year or two and you still don’t know me.” That was after a year or two. I’m not sure how that felt to have said that after six or seven years. The purpose being that you wanted to be more and more observant, look around you, just as John Lee has you look around your whole body as you meditate. He had a phrase one time, “When you live in a monastery, your eyes have to be as big as the monastery, your ears have to be as big as the monastery.” Not so that you’re involved in every issue in the monastery, but simply that you need to notice what’s going on. If there’s something that needs to be done, you do it. When you’ve developed that quality outside, it really helps to develop it inside in your meditation as well. Start looking around the body, start looking around your mind. You want your internal gaze to be as big as your whole mind. Then have that curiosity that once you’ve done that, you want to know what’s connected to what. What causes what? If something is not going well, how do I notice that it’s not going well? Then what do I do to improve the causes? That’s the attitude that’s going to see you through.

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