Mindfulness, Concentration & Discernment

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Close your eyes. Place your hands on your lap, your right hand on top of your left. And then get the mind in position, focused on the breath. You can focus anywhere in the body that you notice. Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out. And wherever you direct your focus in the body, allow that spot to be comfortable. It’s all too easy to tense up around the spot that you’re focused on, which makes it difficult to stay with the breath for long periods of time. Because getting the body, getting the mind in position, that’s not hard. It’s the staying in position. That’s the difficult part, because you want to be able to stay in position no matter what. When you’re in easy situations, when you’re in difficult situations, you want the mind to be in position. So that when you respond in terms of what you think and what you say and what you feel, you want to be coming from a good place. That means you have to be in a good place to begin with and not lose that good place, regardless. So partly this is training in mindfulness, and partly it’s training in discernment. Because you have to discern what’s important in life and what’s not. You have to have a clear sense of priorities and be able to stick with those priorities. This is why the Thaiajans often use the words “mindfulness” and “discernment” together, because these two qualities have to help each other. You can’t depend simply on mindfulness, because all mindfulness is is the ability to stick with something, to remind yourself. You have to stay with something, to keep something in mind. And that’s an important quality in and of itself. There was a Dhamma teacher one time who, thinking that mindfulness meant being aware, said, “Mindfulness isn’t hard. It’s remembering to be mindful that’s hard.” He got the basic point, even though the words got all mixed up. Mindfulness is something that you can develop simply by reminding yourself to say, “What’s going on right here, right now?” But the mindfulness means the ability to keep something in mind. And on the one hand, that’s simply a power you develop through practice, coming back, coming back, coming back, reminding yourself again and again and again. But to keep with that requires discernment, realizing that this is important, to stick with what’s actually going on right here, right now, in the body, in the mind, and not go spinning off in other directions. Because we’ve spent so much of our lives thinking about this, thinking about that, wandering around here, looking at the scenery, finding ourselves in all sorts of different places. We’re further and further away from what’s actually going on. That’s because we think that that kind of thinking is important. It does play a role. There are times when you do have to plan, when you do have to think yourself back to another situation or forward to another situation. But we’re so used to doing that that we forget the importance of staying right here. What discernment is about is reminding yourself that it really is important to stay right here, because this is where you’re fashioning your life. The karma that shapes your life, where is that happening? It’s happening right here, right now. It has also happened in the past, but what’s happened in the past is done. You can’t go back and undo it. But you can decide how you’re going to shape things right here. That’s why we stay right here, right now. We should be very clear about what our intentions are right now, whether they’re skillful or whether they’re not. So as you practice, remind yourself that it’s a combination of mindfulness and discernment, together, that puts us in the right place. It keeps the mind in position. It’s mindfulness and discernment working together that allow the mind to develop concentration. We often hear that concentration comes first and discernment comes next, or that concentration should be followed by mindfulness practice, or there are alternative, different kinds of practice. But that’s not how the Buddha taught things. Mindfulness leads. Concentration leads. Concentration develops mindfulness. Discernment helps lead to concentration. Concentration helps develop discernment. These qualities are all meant to go together, to help one another along. The Buddha didn’t have alternative methods of, say, a mindfulness track and a concentration track. After all, mindfulness, when you’re keeping something in mind, when you’re really consistent in keeping something in mind, the mind is bound to settle down. And when the mind is settled down, it’s a lot easier to keep something in mind. You’re coming from a solid place, strong, well-founded. So these are qualities of mind that we should develop in concert. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Not simply because it’s a nice place to be in the present moment, but you need a good, solid place to stay. And there’s no way you’re going to stay if things are uncomfortable or unstable. The mind becomes more and more solid. As your mind becomes more solid, things become clearer. It’s like running a scientific experiment. You want your equipment to be placed on a good, solid table, a good, solid foundation, so that the readings they give are going to be reliable. If they’re wobbling around, then, of course, you’re going to get wobbling readings. And if you’re trying to measure something, you’re not really sure. This wobble in the reading here, does that come from a change in the thing you’re trying to measure, or is it coming just simply because the table is wobbling? If the table is wobbling, your results are useless. In the same way, when you’re trying to gain insight from a wobbly mind, the results are useless. You may be able to make it match up with something you’ve read in the past, but that’s not real insight. That’s just a memory, a concept. Real insight comes when you see the mind moving and creating suffering in a way that you hadn’t noticed before, or creating stress in a way that you hadn’t noticed before. And sometimes what you notice will fit in with what you read, and sometimes it won’t. Because, after all, a lot of insight is going to be surprising. Seeing yourself creating suffering in a way that you hadn’t noticed before, in a way that you hadn’t really even imagined was going to be suffering, or you’d been doing over and over and over again so many times that you hadn’t really noticed it. But suddenly you see, “Oh, this, yes, does really cause suffering. It really causes stress. And it doesn’t have to be that way.” That’s the other part of the insight, is realizing that you don’t have to keep on doing things that way. Suffering is obvious. It’s optional. The stress of aging, illness, and death—that’s built into our human lives. But there’s a layer of suffering on top of that that really doesn’t have to be there. We add it simply because we’re unskillful. We don’t notice what we’re doing. We don’t notice the results of what we’re doing. We don’t see the connection between what we’re doing and the results. That’s the area in which we have to develop discernment. So these qualities—mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—have to go together. And you may emphasize one of them at a particular time and another at another time, but it’s simply a matter of emphasis. All three of them have to be working together for the mind to settle down. Develop a sense of stability and also start seeing clearly what you’re doing that’s causing stress and suffering in your life and how you can change. Because this is what it’s all about. Sometimes we read in Buddhist philosophy about very abstract notions, but the Buddha was very down-to-earth. The problems he addressed are problems that everybody has to address in life. We’re born into this body that ages, grows ill, and dies—a body that has to be fed, clothed, sheltered, given medicine all the time. There’s a lot of stress built into having a body. And not only that, there are ways of making sure that the body stays alive and stays comfortable and that it doesn’t die. And there’s a lot of stress, not only to yourself but to the people around you, that can be really oppressive. And that oppression is going to come back to some extent in the present life and in future times as well. These are issues that face everybody. How do you eat? How do you look for clothing, shelter, and medicine? How do you deal with the fact that the body is aging, it’s going to grow ill, and someday it’s going to die? How do you deal with these facts of life in such a way that you don’t suffer? So that you’re being more skillful, more harmless in your consumption of things. That you can be more careful about how you act and how you think, so that the way you think doesn’t keep piling more and more suffering, more and more stress on the basic stress of the body. These are the issues that the Buddha has us address. They’re not far away. They’re actually so close that we often overlook them. So we want to get the mind right here, right now, all the time. So we can see these issues that are right here, right now, and learn how to deal with them in a skillful way. This is why it’s important that you know where the “in position” is, both for the body and for the mind, but especially for the mind. Because the meditation isn’t something you do only when you’re sitting here, sitting, facing straight ahead, with your eyes closed, your right hand on top of your left, your back straight. You want the mind to be in position at all times, regardless of what position the body’s in. Because the mind is the source. The body may be part of the problem, but the real root to the problem, the real reason for why the mind is suffering, comes from within the mind itself. In order to see that, you have to be very mindful, very concentrated, very discerning. So work on it and do your best to make it happen. Make sure that the mind stays in position even as you get up from the meditation and go off and do something else. Make sure that the mind is centered within. Mindful, concentrated, discerning. Because it’s only when those qualities are working together that they can give their full results. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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