NR Feeling Your Way

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The bringing isn’t all that hard. It’s the keeping that’s hard. This is why we need mindfulness. Keep reminding ourselves this is where we want to be. And alertness. To check and make sure that we actually are standing here. And the quality of ardency, which means that you really put an effort into it. But it’s not just any old effort. It’s not just the strength of the effort you put in that matters. It’s the discernment that goes into the effort. Because, after all, right effort involves no effort. Knowing what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. Otherwise, you can’t exert right effort. In other words, if you’re going to develop and give rise to skillful qualities, you have to know what skillful qualities are. If you’re going to try to prevent and abandon unskillful qualities, you have to know what they are, too. And how do you learn that? Partly, you learn by listening. Learning that anything with greed, anger, and delusion is going to be unskillful. So if you recognize greed in your thoughts, you have to realize, “This is unskillful.” You recognize aversion, or that this is unskillful. The problem is there are times when you don’t see these things, and yet they’re there. That’s because of delusion. To pass delusion, you have to be willing to learn from trial and error. A lot of us don’t like this, trial and error. We like to have trial and success, trial and success. But you have to be willing to take some chances, and then check to see what happens. And if you realize that you made a mistake, or you did something that led to unfortunate consequences, you’ve learned that that state of mind was unskillful. You want to chalk that up to experience and keep looking more carefully. If you don’t see any problem, if you don’t see that you caused any harm, the Buddha says take joy in that fact, but also keep on training, i.e., keep on looking, because sometimes the harm may come out later. You missed it. But you’re also supposed to take encouragement from the fact that you seem to have done right. This is an area where a lot of us have problems. Our educational system doesn’t teach us how to gain a mastery of things that we’re not good at from the very beginning. It wants to channel us into areas where we can develop our expertise, develop our specialties, and so they can plug us into the big machines of the mind. In other words, the educational system has very little to do with creating whole human beings. It’s more interested in creating little cogs, shaping you, so that you fit into the machine someplace. But when you come to training the mind, you’re trying to train the whole mind. You’re trying to train yourself as a whole human being. This is where you have to learn how to encourage yourself when things aren’t going well, and how to encourage yourself when things are going well, how to be careful both when things are going well and when they’re not going well, so that even though things may not come easily from the very beginning, you find that you do get better and better. So, what have you heard about skillful qualities as you meditate? You’ve heard that you try to stay mindful, you try to stay alert, and you’re ardent. You stick with the breath, coming in and going out. The problem is, you’ve also heard that meditation will develop in certain ways. There are different levels of concentration, and immediately you get curious. What’s the next level of concentration? You hear that concentration involves rapture, it involves pleasure. But where is the rapture? Where is the pleasure? It’s going about the concentration in the wrong way. Those descriptions you hear, “The concentration is like this, the concentration is like that,” that’s like restaurant reviews. They go in and they talk about how the oxtail soup was, and they talk about how the chicken creme brulee was, and you get an idea of what a good oxtail soup should be like and whether the restaurant was up to snuff or not. The same with the creme brulee. But it doesn’t tell you how to make the oxtail soup or the creme brulee. For that, you need a recipe. In terms of the teachings, the recipes come in the instructions on breath meditation. Focus on the breath, noticing whether it’s long, whether it’s short, and then start training yourself. The first step is to train yourself to be sensitive of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out. You try that. Then if you find you can’t manage that, then you ask yourself, “Well, how can you work your way up to it?” Start choosing one part of the body that you’re going to focus on first. Then see if you can expand from that part to include the neighboring part, and then another neighboring part. See if you can build things up like that. Or you might think of the body in terms of energy channels. There’s an energy channel going up and down the spine. So, focus on one part of the spine. When you’re in that part of the spine, then be able to watch that part of the spine all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Allow it to be comfortable, because it’s a lot easier to stay with things when they’re comfortable than when they’re not. When that section is comfortable, think of adding another section of the spine. So you start at the back of the neck and go down to the area between the shoulder blades. Make sure that stays comfortable all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then add the small of the back, and then all the way down to the tailbone. Then you can start going up the legs, the thighs, knees, shins, calves, ankles, the foot down to the toes, the spaces between the toes. Then you have the choice of either taking those one by one, or adding them on to what you’ve already got. In other words, you don’t lose track of that spot at the back of the neck. You just add more on, add more on, add more on, as you go all the way down. Then you can start at the front of the body. You work down the shoulders, down the arms. You include the head. This way you add on more and more and more until you actually have the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. As you’ve been allowing it to be comfortable all the way in, all the way out, you’re also calming what they call the bodily fabrication. That’s the next step. In other words, the intentional part that you add to the breathing. Try to put as little pressure on the breath as possible. It’s going to do its own thing. You don’t have to force it. You don’t have to push it here or there. It knows how to come in. It knows how to come in and go out. If it had waited for your instructions on how to go in and go out, you would have died the moment you were born. A lot of this is just you’re getting out of the way. You should go down and check where you tend to tense things up as you breathe in and breathe out. Allow that to relax. You’ll find that a sense of fullness comes to different parts of the body. You can allow it to stay there all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. That sense of fullness is what’s meant by the Pali term bhitti, rapture. We tend to think about rapture as intense feelings flowing through the body. In some cases, and with some people, that’s the way they are. The word bhitti can also mean refreshment, a sense of being filled with something pleasant, something nice, something that feels good. Learn how to maintain that. That’s the next step. And if it feels pleasant, stick with it. If it starts feeling too intense, then try to find more refined ways of breathing, more refined ways of focusing. In this way, you work through the different steps of breath meditation and you find that you’re creating things from a preconceived notion of what they should be, but you’re just working step by step by step with the breath, getting to know it better. You’re sort of feeling your way. And it’s through feeling your way that you learn. If you have too many preconceived ideas about what it’s supposed to be next, you’re going to mess it all up. It’s like going into the kitchen and having some idea about how this dessert or that dish should be, and you don’t know the proper steps. All you know is the outcome. And then you try to reverse-engineer the recipe. If you don’t really have a lot of experience with food, you’re going to mess it all up. So you put some trust into the process, i.e., trust in the instructions, and start feeling your way. Because there’s always the possibility, as we’ve said, that you could misunderstand the instructions. So you’ve got to learn how to watch what works and what doesn’t work for you. You are responsible. I know a number of Dharma teachers who complain that people come and they want to simply be told what to do, and then if, after doing what they’re told what to do, they don’t get results, they can blame the teacher. After all, they’re not responsible. The teacher gave the wrong instructions. But that’s not how meditation works. There’s only so much you can put into words. And the important lessons are the things that you learn by observing for yourself, feeling your way. So when the Buddha sets up the steps of breath meditation, he doesn’t explain every tiny little step. He gives you specific interim goals. Aim at this, aim at that. And all of those set up, numbered 1 through 16, sometimes you find you can… In the course, say, of step 3, you’re beginning to work on step 4. In the course of step 4, you’re beginning to get step 5 and 6. So there is a natural progression there, but they don’t divide themselves up that neatly into discrete steps. But still, they give you a general idea of how to go. And then when the mind does settle down, learn how to stick with it, allow it to settle down. This is why the Buddha has that phrase “having respect for concentration.” It’s interesting, it’s in a poem where he talks about having respect for all three of the trainings, virtue, concentration, and the discernment. Then he singles out concentration for special mention, because we tend to overlook it so much. We’re already moving on to the discernment. We want the insight, we want the release. Concentration is like those little house elves in Harry Potter. They end up helping at the end. Everybody overlooks them, a lot of people mistreat them, but if you pay them some attention, pay them some respect, it turns out they have some special skills, they have some special knowledge. It’s the same with concentration. The knowledge you gain by being willing to stay with a concentrated state teaches you a lot of things. One mind is in a hurry to move on. You can see that hurry to move on as a disturbance. It’s a defilement, it’s restlessness and anxiety. You’re restless, you want to move on, you’re anxious that you’re not going to get as far as you want in the course of the retreat. And if you side with that disturbance, you’re going to ruin the concentration. What you want to learn is how to side with a concentration, say, “No, I’m just going to stay right here.” John Fuhrman once said that meditators can be divided into two sorts, those who don’t think enough and those who think too much. Most Americans fall into that second category. We think too much, we’ve read too much, we’ve got too many preconceived ideas about where things are going to go and how quickly we want them to get there. So one of the important lessons we have to learn is to stick with a concentration. It may not seem like much, you may be afraid that you’re going to get stuck there, but sticking and getting stuck are two different things. Sticking means that you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. See what you can learn from it, stick with it. The getting stuck is when you start getting lazy and don’t want to go any further. It’s a subtle thing to distinguish between the two. But given our general tendency, we want to learn how to err on the side of giving a lot of time to concentration, a lot of space to it, because it gives you a huge area to learn about the mind. Too many people have the idea that you have to get through the levels of concentration before you get the reward of insight at the end, but there are a lot of insights you learn simply by sticking to the concentration. The Buddha talks about the issue of tranquility on the one side, which is learning how to get the mind to settle down, to be one, and then there’s the issue of insight, which is learning how to ask questions. One of the important questions is, “To what extent should I push this? How long should I stay here?” Realize that there are no automatic answers. Too many times we come with the automatic answer already in mind, “Don’t stay here long, move on fast. Get to the end as quickly as you can.” But that’s one of those questions that there’s no quick and easy answer for. So when the mind begins to settle down, allow it to stay there. Only when you’re with it for a long period of time will you start learning what it has to offer. You may have some unexpected and unanticipated lessons. Those are the really valuable ones. If all you learn is what you’ve already anticipated, you haven’t really learned anything. You’ve just looked to see what’s going on. You see the landmarks that you expect, and you think, “Well, that must be ‘yet,’ this must be ‘x,’ and that must be ‘y.’ I’ve seen that. Let’s move on to the next lesson.” Well, maybe you didn’t. Maybe you got the landmarks all wrong. So sit with a meditation, sit with a concentration, have some respect for concentration, and see what unexpected lessons it’s going to teach you. You can read only so much about what’s skillful and what’s not. As I said earlier, you can read only so much about what’s skillful and unskillful. You can understand only so much from the reading. The real understanding comes from feeling your way.

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