The Mind in Good Shape

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First step when you meditate is to get your body into position. Sit with your back straight, your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of the left. Look forward and close your eyes. That’s getting the body in position. Next step is to get the mind in position. Think thoughts of goodwill for yourself, as in the chant we had just now. Tell yourself, “May I be happy. May I find true happiness.” Reflect on the fact that true happiness has to come from training the mind. Because no matter how good things may be outside, if your mind is in bad shape, you’re not going to be happy. And if your mind is in good shape, it doesn’t matter how bad things are outside. Things can get bad in the body, but if the mind is in good shape, it’s not going to suffer. Once you’ve thought about how much you would like to train the mind, then the next step is to actually do it. So you focus it on the breath. You need to bring the mind into the present moment, because that’s where the mind can be changed. If you think about how much you’d like to change your mind in the future, or how much you wish you had changed your mind in the past, that’s not going to accomplish anything. You have to bring it right here. One way to guarantee that it’s right here is to keep it with the breath. Notice, as you breathe in, take a couple good long deep in and out breaths and see where you feel the breathing process. And send your attention right there. It can be anywhere in the body. The breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s an energy flow in the body that brings the air in and lets it go out. So it can involve the entire nervous system. It involves a lot of the muscles in your torso, in your chest, in your shoulders, in your neck, sometimes in your heart. It’s in your head. So notice where you’re feeling the breathing process and allow it to be comfortable. Allow the breath to settle into a rhythm that feels relaxing but energizing. Basically, a rhythm that you like, something that feels good. If you’re going to stay in the present moment, it’s easier to stay with a sense of ease and comfort. So explore to see how the breathing feels and what kind of breathing will feel best right now. You can try in long and out short, in short and out long, in short and out short, in long and out long, deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. There are lots of different ways to breathe. Each different way will have an effect on the body, and through the body it’ll have an effect on the mind. If you find your mind wandering off, bring it right back. If you find yourself wandering off, bring it back again. Because as you’re staying with the breath, you’re doing two things. One is you’re directing the mind of the breath, and you’re not directing it to other things. In other words, if you find yourself wandering off to something else, you immediately drop it. You don’t even have to tie up the loose ends of the thought. If you find yourself wandering off, just drop it. Come back. If you’re doing something a lot more important here than just letting the mind wander, you’re trying to train the mind. Get it under your control. That’s an important first step in succeeding in the meditation, to get your mind in a state where it really wants to do it. You see the importance of having a trained mind. You see the dangers of not training the mind. That should inspire you to want to meditate, to want to get the mind under control. After all, the mind is what determines what you’re going to be doing in life. The choices you make, the things you do, say, and think, these shape your life. So the shape of your life comes from the shape of your mind. If your mind is out of shape, it’s not going to be a well-shaped life. But if your mind is in good shape, then even if difficult things happen, you don’t feel threatened by them. This, after all, is how people do a lot of unskillful things in life—cruel and thoughtless—because they feel threatened. Something important outside to them gets threatened, and they feel threatened, and so immediately they’ve got to react. But if you can put the mind in a position where its happiness doesn’t have to depend on things outside, then it’s a much better position to do and say and think the skillful thing in any situation. So that’s the first step in gaining some success in the meditation, is to have that desire to stick with it, to really apply yourself to what you’re doing. And then the next step is actually to stick with it, keep doing it again and again and again, as in any task. You need practice. So if the mind wanders off, you bring it back. And each time you bring it back, reward it. Because if you bring it back and just beat it with a stick, getting upset about wandering off, after all, it’s not going to want to meditate. It’s not going to want to come back. So each time you come back to the breath, tell yourself, “For this one breath at least, I want to breathe a breath that feels really satisfying. And whatever part of the body seems starved for breath energy.” If you’ve ever practiced a musical instrument or mastered a sport, you know that simply doing it over and over and over again is not going to give you any success, any mastery. You also have to pay attention to what you’re doing. So you notice where you’re doing things in an awkward way, where you’re doing things in an awkward way, and where you’re doing things in an awkward way. You’ve focused it in different places. Some standard ones are around the navel, in the solar plexus, middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head, tip of the nose, middle of the forehead, top of the head. But really, you can try focusing it anywhere at all. See which spot is your favorite spot. And if you notice the mind wandering off, again, bring it right back. If it seems to wander off in one particular direction, then it’s time to stop and look at what’s the appeal of that particular thought. People usually say, “It’s fun,” or, “It’s important,” or whatever. So you have to think about it for a bit. Ask yourself, “Is it really that much fun? Is it really that important? Couldn’t I be doing something better with my time?” Learn to see the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking. If it’s a sensual desire, a desire for sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, tell yourself you’ve had those things many, many times in your life. Where are the sensual pleasures that you had last week? Where are they now? They’re gone. And if you keep on pursuing just that, where are you going to end up? You’re going to end up with a lot of memories of things that have passed away. Is that where you really want to look for your happiness? If you’re being pulled away by anger over something, ask yourself, “Who’s burning up with the anger right now?” You’re the one who’s burning. The people or the situations that have gotten you angry, they know nothing at all about your anger. So who’s suffering? You’re the one who’s suffering from it. Then again, where does it get you right now? If you’re sleeping, do what you can to wake yourself up. Sometimes this means breathing more heavily, changing the place where you’re focused. If you tend to focus down on the stomach, it tends to make you sleepy. So if you’re feeling drowsy, bring your attention up higher in the body. If you’re feeling restless and anxious, you may want to bring your attention lower in the body. Try to breathe in a way that feels really gratifying each time you breathe in. In other words, if you see the mind wandering off in a particular direction again and again and again, you’ve got to think about it for a while, contemplate it, develop the right attitude to that wandering state of mind so you don’t get sucked in by it. So you’re trying to sensitize yourself as much as possible to what’s going on. And if you find yourself heading off in a particular direction again and again, you have to keep using your ingenuity to get around that particular distraction. So these four qualities—developing a sense of desire, being really persistent in what you’re doing, being sensitive to what you’re doing, and figuring out ways to change things if you find yourself not doing well—how can you improve it? These four qualities—desire, persistence, sensitivity, and ingenuity—are the basis for success in your meditation, just like they’re the basis for success in any training activity, any activity at all outside in the world. It means bringing the right attitude, applying the right effort, and being very sensitive and observant as you practice. So you can get to know your own mind, read your own mind to see what’s needed. So you bring it into a state of balance here in the present moment, where it feels really good, feels stable, being right here, feels at home right here. This is basically where everything happens in your life, is in the present moment. But for the most part, we’re not here. We’re all thinking about something else. The decisions we make, the choices we make, all too often we make them without realizing what we’re doing, because we’re distracted. So the forces that are shaping our lives go underground. We find ourselves saying things and doing things and wondering, “Why did I do that?” It’s because we’re not really paying attention to what’s going on right here, right now. So the breath is a good place to anchor the mind. It gives it a good foundation so it can start training itself, gaining more a sense of alertness, self-awareness, self-control. Those are the qualities that are needed to get the mind in a position where it really can find inner happiness, an inner sense of stable well-being. I can guarantee that, regardless of what’s happening outside, the mind is always in good shape. And it’s in a position where it can shape your life as skillfully as possible.

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