Bare vs. Appropriate Attention

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As you focus on the breath, it’s important that you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. In particular, to which ways the breathing feels comfortable and which ones don’t. Observe the breath carefully with that question in mind. When you find something that’s uncomfortable, experiment with other ways to see if you can make it more comfortable. This is important for several reasons. One is that it’s a lot easier to stay with a breath when it’s comfortable than when it’s not. And when you have the sense of comfort that comes from within, it’s a lot easier to let go of your outside attachments. Instead of being hungry and looking for places to feed outside, you’ve got a good source of food for the mind inside. But it goes deeper than that. You’re also gaining practice in what’s called appropriate attention, looking at things in terms of where there’s stress, what’s causing it, and what you can do to put an end to stress. Those are the questions you have to bring to the practice at all times, regardless of what you’re doing. I guess that’s the only way you’re going to overcome ignorance. Because ignorance is just that, not looking at things in terms of the Four Noble Truths, but looking in other terms. And these other terms can run the gamut. The Buddha gives a few examples. Who am I? What am I? A lot of the questions that we tend to bring to the practice are, “Am I basically good? Am I basically bad? Am I basically enlightened? Am I basically unenlightened? Can I depend on my intuitions to tell me the truth? Do I have to learn from somebody else?” You’re trying to put those questions aside. This is why the meditation is not simply a matter of just observing whatever is there. It’s as if there was some ideal, bare awareness that we could bring to things. We always bring agendas. We always bring questions, assumptions, to what we’re doing. And so it’s important that we bring the right assumptions. Back in the beginning of the twentieth century, there were some people in Asia who thought that you could reduce meditation to simply that, bare attention, simply observing things arising and passing away. And the purity of that bare attention would guarantee purity of insight. And they felt that they had a method that could be exported to other countries as well. Well, what we’ve found is that, to whatever extent that method did work, it was because people were bringing their Buddhist training, their Buddhist assumptions. If you take a pure observing technique and you put it in another culture, people start bringing other questions to it. And all of a sudden, the meditation goes off into other directions, which simply goes to show that pure observation or pure awareness, even if it were possible, is not what’s what the path is all about. You bring questions to the path. As the Buddha said, there are two things that can help spark awakening, just as there are two things that can help get in the way of awakening. The two things that spark awakening can be the voice of another person pointing you in the right direction and appropriate attention. The two things that get in the way are, again, the voice of another person telling you something that’s going to prevent you from looking at things in these terms, and inappropriate attention when you look at your experience in any other way. Remember, this is always in the background. Where is the stress? Or, what am I doing that’s helping to put an end to stress? Because as you apply these four categories to your experience, sometimes you’ll be placing more emphasis on one side than on another. For example, as we’re staying here with the breath, we’re trying to develop as much concentration, as much mindfulness as possible, i.e., we’re developing the path. For if you’re going to look at stress and pain with any equanimity, with any steadiness, pain has to have a strong sense of a good, solid foundation, a strong sense of well-being, so that it doesn’t feel threatened by the pain. It doesn’t keep giving into its old agendas around pain, i.e., what to do to get rid of it, or how to run away from it, or how to just sit there and grit your teeth and bear it. The path is meant to give you a lot of help in standing up to the pain, in standing up to whether it’s physical pain or mental pain, in being able to sit with it and not suffer from it, to analyze it, to comprehend it, in other words, to exercise the sense of the skills that are appropriate to those four noble truths. This is why the Buddha taught those four noble truths. As you analyze your experience in those terms, there’s a duty that goes with each of them. As we’re practicing, we’re turning that duty into a skill. We’re getting skillful at comprehending stress and pain, skillful at abandoning the cause, skillful at developing the path. There are different things we could be doing right here, right now. It’s not just watching or just one approach. We have the four categories because there are four alternatives to what we could be doing. So always keep those questions in the back of your mind, because those are the questions that keep you on the path and that point your practice in the direction of awakening. you

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