The Inner Monitor

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Jon Lee used to like to say that, as you meditate, you’re developing three qualities in the mind, three treasures in the mind. He uses the words “sombhat” in Thai, which means “treasure.” First is you’ve got the breath. That’s the object treasure. In other words, it’s the right object to settle on because it’s very close to the mind. Of all the bodily functions, it’s the one that’s most amenable to your direction. You can think about making the breath more comfortable, more refreshing, and it responds. Think about making it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow. It’ll respond. So you’re trying to develop the second treasure, which is the quality of the breath, a sense of well-being that comes from staying with the breath. The well-being here is both a sense of physical ease and a sense of stillness in the mind. The mind has a place where it can settle down. It can move in and put down roots. It isn’t forced to wander all the time. So the quality we’re working for here is that sense of well-being both in body and mind. Lying behind all this is the treasure of good intentions, skillful intentions. Here the intention is to keep the breath in mind and to keep it comfortable, to keep the mind at ease, to keep it focused. Now, to maintain this intention requires three other mental qualities. The first is mindfulness, just the ability to keep something in mind. Then there’s alertness, which watches over. Then there’s ardency, which is the effort to do it skillfully. You want all these three things to be working together. Alertness is probably the most important here. You keep monitoring how things are going. At one end, you monitor how the breath is going to see if it needs any changes, and at the same time you monitor how your mind is going to see if it’s wandering off to see if it’s really settled in, basically evaluating the situation so that you can decide what to do. This is the quality that’s in charge of everything. If you can’t keep watch of your own mind, if you can’t continue to monitor your own mind, there’s no way you can train it. There’s no way you can develop any of these qualities. You slip off the breath and you don’t even know. We’ve all had this kind of experience. What happened to the monitor? It got shut off. Or it got kidnapped. It was taken over by somebody else, i.e., another intention. So it’s important that you have this monitor really solid and really strong, very conscious of what it’s doing, very mindful of what it should be doing, not only for the meditation to work, but as you develop in the meditation, then you can use this quality in the rest of your life. Because the troubles that come up in the mind don’t come up only while you’re meditating; they can come up at any time. And as we all know, the biggest dangers in life lie not outside, but the dangers that our own mind can do to us when it’s not well monitored. This may sound confining, the idea of having a monitor watching all the time, but we do have one. The thing is, we have many different monitors with lots of different agendas. Some of the monitors are ones that, if we actually sat down and talked with them, we would agree with what their values are and what their intentions are. Some of the monitors, though, are things that, on reflection, you couldn’t really agree with, but they do take over. You suddenly find yourself running with a particular emotion or running with a particular idea that is totally crazy, totally against your own best interest, as if you’ve been hijacked. So be especially careful as you meditate to keep this monitor watching very assiduously, very constantly, very carefully, with a lot of sensitivity. And get used to having the sense of the monitor being on your side, i.e., it provides you with a sense of well-being right here, right now. This is one of the reasons why some of the stricter monitors get overthrown. They tend to be too harsh, insensitive. They may be right, but they go about it the wrong way. You want a monitor who’s wise and has a sense of physical well-being on its side. You’ll notice this as emotions come into the mind, strong emotions. It might be greed, fear, anger. It might be jealousy, or whatever. They can very quickly overthrow any intelligent monitor, and they’ve got the body on their side. The emotion arises and it’s got hormones to go along with it. They have an effect on the body, and they seem very, very real because of that effect on the body. They’re much stronger than any voice of reason might be. But it’s a mistake to think that it’s the emotion versus reason, because each emotion has its reasons. You have your reasons for being angry, you have your reasons for being fearful, jealous, and you can justify them to yourselves, because you have many selves. And so what you want is something with better reasons. But it can also get the body on its side, too. This is why we spend so much time getting the breath to be easeful, taking that sense of well-being, trying to make it go straight to the heart, really gratifying, to find which area of the body is most sensitive to comfortable breathing or seems most in need of good breath energy. Usually it’s around the heart, maybe in the throat. In Pilates, they talk about your core being lower down. That might be your core. But a lot of people, the core is around the throat, the heart, and the chest. Whatever part of the body is most responsive to different ways of breathing and seems most gratified when you find a rhythm that’s just right, when you find that sense of well-being, then think of it spreading out, saturating the rest of the body. And once you’ve gained a sense of this, try to be able to tune into it as quickly as you can so you can have it whenever you need it. There’s a common tendency when we meditate to say we’ve got a whole hour to get the mind settled down. So in the beginning, when it hasn’t quite settled down, you say, “Well, that’s normal. It’s going to take a little while.” But you don’t have to. This is why sometimes it’s good to have little five-minute meditation breaks. When you realize that if you’re going to get anything out of the break, you’ve got to settle down immediately. Find that sense of well-being. And it’s there. You can tap into it. Once you’ve recognized it, once you’ve discovered it, it’s always there for you to tap into. So try to tap into it as quickly as you can because you’re going to need it. In many cases, as quickly as you can. So when a strong emotion comes up with its reasons, your better reasoning faculties can also have a bodily ally. Say, for instance, that anger arises. It’s going to have its reasons for being angry. And you’ll notice that your heartbeat changes and there’s a sense of tension, say, in the chest or right around the stomach. And it’s very insistent. We’ve learned to interpret those feelings as a need to get it out of our system. A part of us may also know that if you get it out of your system, it’s going to cause a lot of trouble, so we bottle it up. That doesn’t help either. So you want to tap into your good breath. Use your breath energy and use that as your foundation so that your more skillful monitor can then be in a better position to reason with the anger. Because there always is a part of the mind that’s monitoring what’s going on. Say, once anger arises, there’s going to be a part of the mind that makes a decision. “Shall I continue with this anger or is it really stupid?” And no matter how much our more reasonable side might say it’s really stupid, the other side will have its reasons too. And you suddenly find yourself going with it. The monitor has been kidnapped, hijacked, because the other side seems stronger. Its reason seemed very reasonable. So several things have happened here. One is that your mindfulness has lapsed. It’s like you’ve gone unconscious for a moment and you’ve woken up in another mindset. Or your qualities of conscience have been blinded for a moment. You’ve got blindfolds on. The voice of wiser, more sage counsel in your mind has been pushed off to the side as totally irrelevant. “That’s just reason,” you’re saying, “but I’ve got a stronger desire here.” And the desire will have its reasons. So as soon as you catch this happening, you need something to work against that. Get the breath energy in the body to help counteract the pull of the anger. And then think of that good breath energy working through the tension of the anger, dissolving it away, so that you begin to level the playing field. Then you can look at the actual reasons for the anger. Sometimes it’ll be stubborn and will refuse to present its reasons to the full light of day. But if you’re insistent enough on it, they will come to the surface. Then you’re in a better position to understand the anger for where it’s coming from, to see where its pull, where its appeal was, and to realize that you don’t really want to go there. There may be alternative ways of dealing with a situation. The same with fear. It’s interesting that in the Buddha’s list of unskillful emotions, fear doesn’t show up. There is a passage where he talks about fear as being a basis for biased or prejudiced action, unfair action. Out of fear, you’re afraid to confront certain powers, and so you go along with them. But it’s usually related to fear. It’s related to greed, anger, or delusion of some kind. Those are the unskillful emotions. So when a fear arises, you have to ask yourself, “Is this a reasonable fear, or is it an unreasonable fear?” If it’s tainted with greed, anger, aversion, or delusion, those are the things you’ve got to deal with. After all, the fear of acting in an unskillful way is one that you actually want to listen to. Fear of harming yourself. Fear of harming others. That’s something you really want to listen to. So fear in and of itself is not bad. It’s when it’s unreasonable, when it’s blind. That’s the part of the fear that you have to deal with. So again, you try to tap into the breath and tap into that part of the mind that observes. Once the breath has gotten through some of the physical side of the fear, then you’re in a better position to actually look at the fear as an emotion in the mind. There’s a story of a John Cowe who was staying in a cave one time. His schedule was such that he didn’t realize that there was also a tiger staying in the cave, because the tiger had its schedule, too. It had certain times of the day that it would go out to feed, and certain times it would come back into the cave. It was deeper into the cave. And it just so happened that its times for leaving and entering the cave were times when the John Cowe happened to be away from the cave. Until one night, it was a full moon night, he was out doing walking meditation in front of the cave, and the tiger happened to come back. And John Cowe’s first reaction was just abject fear. There was the tiger. The tiger was walking right toward him. But he had the good sense to say, “Wait a minute. The tiger is much less dangerous to me than my fear is. My fear can make me do all sorts of horrible things if I don’t watch out.” So this is a good time to observe the fear. That monitor, the one that was watching, he directed the monitor part of the mind to just watch the fear. What is this fear? Where has it come from? Watch it as an event in the mind. And as he watched it and pursued it, the mind went into very deep concentration as he tried to see, “Okay, what in the hit of this fear is really worth listening to? Why does it have so much power over the mind? Let’s just watch it come. Why is it coming?” Then he watched it and watched it and watched it, and the fear left him. He went into such deep concentration that he lost track of his body. When he finally came out of concentration, it was a long time afterwards. You could tell because the moon had moved quite a way in the sky. But the tiger was gone. The tiger felt no sense of threat from him as he was sitting there, standing there, watching his own mind. And so he came out of the experience not only alive, but also with a lot more understanding. And the mind was a lot more free. Because this is the problem with these emotions. They seem to tell us all kinds of good things we should be doing, good from their point of view. But they enslave us. They push us around. And as we see all around us, we see the power of greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed can cause all kinds of harm, not the least harming the person who gives in to them. And yet when that person has to suffer the consequences, the greed, aversion, and delusion are gone. It’s like unreliable friends. They get you to do something unskillful, then as soon as the police come, they run off and leave you holding the bag. So you’ve got to realize that these things are not your friend. We tend to indulge in these emotions because part of us finds that there’s an advantage to them. One of our monitors is very easily, or many of our monitors are very easily taken over by them, converted to their side. It’s just like politicians. They have all kinds of propaganda tricks. So your wiser monitor needs tricks as well. That’s why we not only work on making mindfulness and alertness more continuous. This quality of ardency means not just that you’re skillful with the breath, but that you’re skillful with using the breath, learning how to associate this calm, wise observer, this calm, wise monitor, with a sense of physical ease and well-being. That association is important. You want to strengthen that as much as you can. It’s only a way of using good reasons against the bad reasons of your destructive emotions. It’s not simply reason versus a rebellious body. It’s good reason that it’s learned to get the body on its side. So as you meditate, try to develop this quality of the monitor, the observer, watching things and evaluating them. When something comes up, you want to learn how to quickly evaluate it, whether it’s helpful in the meditation or not, especially in the early stages. When whatever comes up that’s not related to the breath, you say, “Not now. This is not the time or place for that.” You get used to being able to drop a thought wherever you are in the thought, so you can get back to the breath. Then, as this skill is developed, you can start admitting the thoughts into the range of your awareness so you can observe them. Understand what’s the pull of this particular thought, what’s its advantages, what are its drawbacks. If in the course of that you find yourself getting pulled into the thought, you’ve got your skill in learning how to drop a thought in mid-sentence, regardless of how entangled you’ve been. You just want to learn how to say, “Nope, drop it. Get back to the comfortable breathing.” So one of your tricks should be, once you’ve dropped a thought, to get back to the breath. Try to give yourself a couple of really good, gratifying breaths to reward yourself for coming back so that your monitor can have more allies, a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, a sense of being at home with a peaceful state in the body and the mind. So that your monitor can be strengthened. And you can change your understanding. It’s not reason versus emotion. It’s good reasons with good emotions versus bad emotions with bad reasons. When you see the playing ground in that way, then it’s a lot easier for the good side to win.

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