Stick with It

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Close your eyes and focus on the breath. When you breathe in, notice where you feel the sensation of breathing. Where do you feel it when you breathe out? Keep your awareness focused right there. Notice any part of the body. The important thing is that you allow it to be comfortable. Don’t tense up or force the breath or squeeze the breath. Just allow the breath to come in and out in a way that feels easy and natural. You can experiment a bit to see what kind of breathing feels best. Make it a little longer. See how that feels. If it feels good, try a little bit longer. Or if long breathing doesn’t feel good, you can try shortening it until you get to just the right rhythm. Make it heavy or light, fast or slow, shallow or deep. If you have trouble staying with the breath, you might want to use a meditation word. A common one is bhutto, which means “awake.” It’s one of the titles they gave to the Buddha after his awakening. It’s a quality of mind that we want to develop. You can think “Buddh” with the in-breath and “dho” with the out-breath. Otherwise, you have no other responsibilities right now. You do, though, have the responsibility of looking after your mind to make sure it stays here. If you catch it wandering off, just bring it right back. If you catch it again, bring it again. Each time you bring it back, remind yourself that you want to ask yourself what way of breathing would feel really good right now. Reward yourself with good, comfortable breathing each time you come back, and the mind will be more and more likely to come back with a sense of ease, a sense of interest. If you simply force the mind to stay here, it’s not going to stay. It’s going to rebel after a while. But if you make the breath interesting, you remind yourself that this is the energy of your life. It keeps the body alive. It allows you to sense the different parts of the body. The breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole flow of energy in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. The more sensitive you get to the breath, the more you realize it is happening all over the body. In some places, it’s more noticeable. In other places, it’s more subtle. But as your awareness gets more and more centered, more and more still, you begin to pick up the subtleties, and you want to allow them to be comfortable, too. You might take a brief survey through your body as you breathe in, breathe out, to see how it feels in the arms, how it feels in the legs, in your head, in your torso. If you notice any sense of tension or tightness, related to the breathing, either as you breathe in, with tension building up, or as you breathe out, holding on to tension, allow it to relax. Think of it dissolving away. So there’s no stiffness or tightness, say, in your wrists or your ankles or your knees, your elbows, any place in the body. And as you do this, you find that there’s a sense of ease, even a sense of fullness, that develops. Allow that sense of ease and fullness to spread around. Keep up the survey until you feel ready to settle down and find a spot where you feel most congenial, that it feels just right to stay there. The breath feels good, the mind feels comfortable there. Then allow your awareness to spread from that spot to fill the whole body. And then just try to maintain that sense of broad-centered awareness. This is something you develop. This is something you work on. We often hear that the whole point of meditation is to let go, but there’s also the aspect of developing. In fact, that’s what the Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means, to develop. You’re developing mindfulness. You’re developing concentration. And a part of concentration is a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of fullness. So the mind is willing to settle down, to become one with the breath. Then as you develop that sense of ease, that sense of being centered, try to maintain it. That’s one of the more difficult parts of the meditation, sticking with it. Sometimes the mind is fickle. It might be interested for a little while, then it’s okay enough. What else is there? Well, things haven’t really developed as fully as they can. We’re not here for entertainment. We’re here to develop good qualities in the mind. A large part of developing is just sticking with it. It’s like planting a seed. Or like those trees we planted yesterday. Plant the tree and say, “That was fun, planting a tree.” But then if you leave it alone, don’t check up on how the tree is doing. After a while, it’s going to die. So you have to keep looking after it, watering it, giving it fertilizer, making sure it doesn’t develop any diseases. This is the more tedious part of the meditation, but it’s sticking with it over the long haul. That’s what makes all the difference. And so you learn to encourage yourself to stick with it and remind yourself that the important things in life don’t come quickly, they don’t come easily. They take effort. And even when you’ve got something nice, it’s not going to stay nice forever unless you look after it. So as the mind settles down like this, the important skill is learning how to maintain this sense of well-being. And to stick with it as consistently as possible. This is where you develop the qualities of mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is what reminds you what to do now and also why you’re doing it. It’s not just a matter of technique. It’s also a matter of motivation. You remind yourself that it’s important that the mind be trained. It’s important that I have a sense of feeling centered, because life has so many currents pushing you this way and pushing you that way. All kinds of directions—what this person wants, what that person wants. And if you don’t have your own sense of center, you just kind of get washed around and you lose touch of what’s important in your life, which is the well-being of the mind. So when the mind has a sense of well-being, the things you do, say, think, come from a good place. And it’s your actions that really shape your life. So you want to make sure your actions do come from a good place. So even though it may take effort and patience to stick with the meditation, the effort is well spent. The patience has its rewards. Some of them come immediately, some of them come over time. So give the mind some time to stay here. If there’s any impulse to go think about something else, remind yourself that you can do that later. It’s rare that you have the peace and the quiet and the opportunity to really develop the mind, the strength of its good qualities. So they form a good foundation for your life.

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