Firmly Intent

January 26, 2010

Try to focus your attention on the process of breathing, how it feels in the different parts of the body, and try to firm up your intention to stay there, to stay with this one topic. That’s the Thai translation for the word samadhi, which we translate as “concentration.” They define it as firmly established intention. In the process of making your intention firm and keeping it firm, you’ll learn an awful lot. Sometimes we’re told that you have to get the mind really solidly concentrated before you can develop any insight, but that’s not really the case. As the Buddha once pointed out, getting the mind established to stay in firm concentration involves both insight and tranquility. In other words, whatever insights and stillness you can develop are aids in getting the mind to stay firmly intent. Because the first thing you notice as you make that intention is that other intentions come up and they make your original intention wobble or disappear entirely. You find yourself in another world, some place, anticipating something in the future, thinking about something in the past, or else going off entirely into a fantasy. That’s how you bring the mind back. As soon as you catch yourself, bring it back. It’s in the process of catching it and bringing it back. That’s how you develop mindfulness and alertness. Because mindfulness and alertness are essential qualities of concentration as well. They all fall into the concentration aggregate of the path. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration all go together. If you see the mind slipping off into something unskillful, which for the moment we define unskillful as anything that has to do with things other than the breath, then you drop it. You try to give rise to an awareness of the breath. Once you find you’re aware of the breath, you try to maintain that awareness. And here you learn some skills about how to keep the mind here. And that, too, involves some insight into the mind. When you see the mind wandering off, you learn about its defilements, you learn about its waywardness, you learn about the ways it can fool itself, its disguise, its movements from itself. As you learn how to keep the mind with the breath, you learn a lot about what the mind likes, what it finds interesting. Because the ability to cultivate an interest in the breath is a very important part of staying with it. It’s not just in and out. The breath has lots of ins and lots of outs. There’s long breathing, there’s short breathing, or in-long and out-short, in-short and out-long, fast or slow. Heavy or light, deep or shallow. Many different rhythms and textures of the breath. And one way of staying with the breath, of firming up that intention to stay with it, is to experiment. To see how different ways of breathing feel. Which ones feel most satisfying? Which ones are most interesting? Which ways of breathing help you stay interested in the breath and able to stay focused on the breath for long periods of time? And this may mean that you have to be sensitive to different needs for breathing or different needs for different types of breath, from one breath to the next. The needs of the body may change. For a while, long breathing may feel good, and after a while, not so good. So you change. It may feel good for a while to breathe deep into the torso, and another time you say, “Well, how about the shoulders?” They need some breath energy as well. The arms need breath energy, the legs, around the face, down the spine, into the pelvis. In other words, you do whatever is needed to keep the mind with the breath, keep it interested in the breath. And in doing this, the power of your concentration increases, the steadiness and the firmness of that intent develops. At the same time, you’re learning things about the mind, how to make the present moment more interesting, so the mind doesn’t get bored and start wandering off to other things. And as you hold to that one intent, you learn an awful lot about the other things that come up in the mind. For if you simply allow the mind to wander around as it likes, after a while you begin to lose sense of its direction, where it’s been, where it’s going, what makes it move from one object to another. But if you hold in mind the idea that you’re going to stay with one thing, every other intention comes up. It bumps into that one thing, and you get to see which direction it’s coming from. Is it coming from desire? Is it coming from anger? Is it coming from boredom? Is it coming from restlessness? You have something solid to compare it with. It’s like being in a train at a train station. If you look out the window and if there’s a post near the window, then you can tell. If it seems like the train next to you is moving, you can be sure. Is it our train moving, or is it that train moving? Because you can see whether the post is moving. If there’s no post there, you’re not really sure. You need something firm in order to compare all the other movements of the mind. So you want to maintain this intent and make it firm. And in the course of increasing your concentration or firming up this intent, it’s not simply a matter of forcing the mind into the present. You gain some understanding of the mind, which is why good, solid concentration requires insight into the workings of the mind. Because otherwise it holds things still for a while, and then as soon as there’s the slightest slip in your awareness, you’re off someplace else. In particular, an important lesson to learn is how the mind deceives itself. You hear with a breath and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else, and the question is, where were you in the meantime? How did you deceive yourself into not noticing what was happening? When you get back to the breath and you make up your mind as soon as there’s the slightest indication that the mind is going to go someplace else, you want to know. You want to see. At first it might seem impossible. How can you know the mind when it’s being mindless? But you can. It’s like there are different parts of the mind. One part is planning to leave and it hasn’t told the other part yet because it knows if it tells the other part, the other part’s going to say no. It’s like a delinquent. It’s like a child trying to slip out of the house without letting the parent know. How does that dynamic unfold? And which part of the mind are you in at that particular time? When you can catch yourself doing this, you learn an awful lot about the workings of the mind, the workings of ignorance. Because ignorance is not just a blank lack of knowledge. There’s a will in there as well, and you want to see that. The more clearly you see that, the more you’re able to counteract it. In this way, your concentration becomes firm, not only simply through strength of intent, but also through understanding. You develop skill. This is a lot of what insight is. We traditionally talk about wisdom as seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. Which of those truths has a duty? This is the framework that you bring to the present moment. Because regardless of how many different ways the present moment can manifest itself, or how many different situations you may find yourself in, still there are four categories that you want to bring to it. You want to look to see where there’s stress, what’s causing the stress, what you can do to put an end to the cause so that you can realize the cessation of that stress. And each of those categories has a duty. You try to comprehend the stress. In other words, look at it, understand it, see it for what it is, and particularly see how it’s moving. Because in the movements of the stress, you can see the movements of the cause—craving, ignorance, clinging. Then you develop the factors of the path, the virtue, the concentration, and the discernment that allow you to abandon the cause. You develop these qualities in the mind. It’s not just random observation, watching virtue come and go, watching concentration come and go. When you see it come, you try to maintain it. When you see it go, you try to bring it back or reestablish it. These are things you develop. And then the cessation is something you realize, that you see, you witness for yourself. So the discernment is not just a matter of saying, “Oh yes, there is stress and there’s a cause.” You actually see the stress. You comprehend it. There’s a duty to be done. There’s a skill to be mastered. And the more firmly you can focus the mind, the more firmly you can maintain that original intent to stay with the breath. The more clearly you can see what’s actually going on and what needs to be done, and the more you can master what needs to be done. For example, you may see that something’s coming up that’s causing distress. You look at it and you say, “Well, there’s a certain perception that goes along with it. That’s one of the aggregates.” Now, the perception itself is not the problem. It’s the way you claim to the perception. In all these cases, the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness—are not the problem. The problem is the clinging, combined with the craving, the way you hold on to these things, the way you keep doing them over and over and over again and believe in them implicitly. But if you can learn to see these things as processes, simply as activities that you’re doing again and again, you can ask yourself, “What’s the purpose of doing this particular perception?” Think of it that way—doing a perception, doing a feeling, doing a fabrication. Why do you keep doing it? Can you imagine yourself doing something else, something that doesn’t involve that same level of stress and suffering? And when you learn to stop, that’s when you realize, “Oh, I’m doing something else.” Clinging in that way, there’s a release of that particular instance of stress and suffering. And the more deeply you can understand the processes, the more radical that letting go can be, the more radical the release can be. You learn to see everything in the mind as a type of process, and you learn to see the moment of intention in that process. Again, it’s that issue of maintaining one firm intent that you’re going to stay right here and watch carefully. Holding steady to that one intent is what allows you to watch all the other intentions as they move. John Lee has a simile. He says, “It’s like being born in a train. You sit on the train, you look out the window, and as long as you’re moving, everything seems to be moving. Trees move, clouds move, mountains move, people move, houses move. It’s only when you get off the train and stand still that you can see what moves and what doesn’t move.” And in particular, you can see the intentions in the mind, see how they shape things and cause stress. In the beginning part of the path, it’s about replacing unskillful intentions with more skillful ones, like the intention to stay here, like the intention to stay focused on the breath, to keep it interesting, to keep it engaging, to find it absorbing. So it does give rise to a sense of ease and fullness, fullness in body, fullness in mind, all the way to more refined levels of well-being. You observe that skillful level of intention, so you can begin to see the unskillful levels of intention that are there as well. This is why the Buddhist basic teaching is karma. It’s about intention. We look on the one hand to develop skillful intentions and to make them more skillful and more skillful, and to finally get to the point where we know we no longer need intention at all. The realization comes when it’s like for the mind not to add an intention, not to have to be doing, doing, doing all the time. These are the paradoxes of the teaching. You have to do something really skillfully for the mind, and do it consistently before you can find out what it’s like for the mind not to be doing anything. So work on this intention to keep the mind still. In the process of getting really skillful at that, you’re going to learn a lot about the mind. So you don’t have to wait and say, “Well, I’m going to keep the mind still and then maybe someday gain some insight into the mind.” There have to be insights along the way. If you’re going to really master the skill, then once it’s mastered, you find that even deeper insights come. That’s why it is that in all the doing that the mind is engaged in, it keeps creating suffering for itself, even though the purpose of its doing is to find happiness and well-being. You want to understand that ignorance that leads you to repeatedly doing the same things that keep causing suffering again and again and again, so you can finally develop a sense of dispassion for them and stop doing them. That’s what it means to let go. It’s not that your mind has a hand that’s grasping onto things. It has these habits, and you let go of the habit. It’s like an addiction. When you finally realize that not only are you causing this suffering, but you’re also doing it. But it’s not necessary. You don’t have to do it. That’s when you can go beyond it.

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