Full, Focused Attention

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Try to let go of all other thoughts and focus on thinking about the breath. Posing a few questions in mind. Where do you feel the breath? Where do you feel the process of breathing? Pay attention to the breath. Imagine right there. Try to develop a quality of intentness in what you’re doing, giving it your full attention, and being very careful to keep this in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that this is where you want to stay with the sensation of the body breathing. Allow the sensations to be comfortable. Don’t clamp down on the body. Allow it some freedom. And try to be sensitive to each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out, because the needs of the body will change. Once you’ve found a comfortable rhythm of breathing, you have to be careful not to become mechanical with it. So you can be sensitive to what may have felt good two or three breaths in the past. Lots ago was not so good right now. And make whatever adjustments are necessary. That’s all you have to do, but you have to give it your all for it really to make any difference. All your attention, all your meticulousness, all your mindfulness. Because we’re not sitting here waiting for something else to happen. We’re sitting here looking at the process of breathing. And as you get more and more skillful at that, you can begin to look at the mind as it’s looking at the process of breathing. Because everything you need to know is right here. The Buddha talks about four ways of establishing mindfulness on the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves. Mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves. And they’re all right here. With the breath, you’ve got the body. And paying attention to how the breath feels, you’ve got feelings of either pleasure or stress, or in more neutral feelings. They’re right there, right next to the breath. There’s your mind state, which is either with the breath or not, maybe leading a little bit towards desire, maybe leading towards irritation or delusion. Then you want to notice that. And then there are the mental qualities you bring to this. You may notice the hindrances. If the sensual desire comes up that pulls you away from the breath, note that fact and remind yourself you don’t have to go with that desire. You’ve traveled around with those desires. You’ve seen those desires a lot. It’s time to let them go and see what else you can learn in life. The same with ill will. Whoever you feel ill will for, you’re not accomplishing anything of any worth or any value by harboring ill will. It’s an obstacle to your own mind, and it’s an obstacle to your well-being. You don’t gain anything from anyone else’s suffering. So why wish them any ill? Sloth or tarpar arise. You want to notice that drowsiness, sleepiness. And ask yourself exactly how you know you’re sleeping, aside from the fact that it’s difficult to focus on the breath. But what are the other physical symptoms of sleepiness? What do you feel around the eyes? Is it heaviness in the head? Exactly what is this feeling of sloth, tarpar, drowsiness? Sometimes just taking an interest in that will get you past it. Because sloth and tarpar come not only when the body really needs sleep, but also when you’re bored and want to do something else. Nothing seems interesting here right now, and so you try to think of some way of escaping. One of the best cures for that is to really take an interest in what you’re doing, to realize that even though it may not seem like much is going on, the mind is calculating, the mind is adjusting, the mind is doing all kinds of things. And, of course, the body is functioning. Lots of things are going on in the body. And you’re working with the breath to bring these two very complex things together. And so, if you look carefully enough, you see a lot is going on right here, on many levels. So try to take an interest. At the very least, ask yourself, “What is this breath energy? Do I feel it only in the lungs, or only in the nose, or other parts of the body that feel energy as well?” How do those sensations of energy in the different parts of the body relate to the breath coming in and the breath going out? And how about experimenting with different ways of breathing? Because one way of breathing may feel okay, what you’re used to. But unless you really try other ways of breathing, you don’t know how good it can be. As for restlessness, that calmness, that calms down when you can find something that feels really good inside. There’s a sense of refreshment, a sense of ease that can come when you stay steadily with the breath. And again, as with thoughts of sensual desire, you’ve been worried about things, you’ve been anxious about things, restless about things in the past. These thoughts that come in, you don’t really have to deal with them right now. Put them aside for the time being. If they’re really important, you can tell them. We’ll come back and we’ll talk things over after the meditation. But for the time being, you want the mind to get in a good shape. So if it’s something important you really have to think through, the mind will be in strong, clear, alert, more likely to do a good job of the thinking. Uncertainty or doubt? The best way to deal with that is to really look carefully at what you’re doing again. You know the breath is coming in, you know it’s going out, hold on to that. Is it comfortable? Well, experiment. There’s only one way to learn, and that’s to experiment. That may not seem like much in terms of a beachhead against doubt and uncertainty, but you’d be surprised what you learn by really looking carefully at something, giving it your full attention, being very meticulous about what you do. This is why there’s so little going on in the monastery compared to the world outside. So we can focus intently on what we’re actually doing and see clearly what we’re doing. If you know one thing really thoroughly, it connects with a lot of other things. But if you know a lot of things superficially, there’s no real connection. The knowledge doesn’t penetrate. It doesn’t penetrate the things, and it doesn’t really penetrate your own mind. This is why the quality of citta, or intentness, is really important in the practice. Because if you pay only half a mind to what you’re doing, you only get to see, well, you don’t even get to see half of what’s out there, only a tiny, tiny fraction of what’s in here. When we talk about the path and the goal being one, the most useful way of thinking about that is that you don’t sit here walking on the path and looking ahead to see where the goal is, but looking up again and again and again to see when it’s going to come. It’s going to come right here where you’re acting on the path, where you’re following the path. That’s where things are going to appear, i.e., right here at the breath, right here where the mind and the body meet, right at the breath. If anything’s going to appear, it’s going to appear right here, right where you’re working on the path, right where you’re monitoring how things are going, which is one of the functions of mindfulness. You keep something in mind, and then what you’re keeping in mind you use to judge what’s actually happening right here. And if you find that you’re sticking with the breath as you intended, that’s fine. If not, then you make adjustments. That’s how mindfulness and right effort come together. It’s that quality of ardency that’s described in the basic formula for mindfulness. I was reading a book the other day that was talking about how mindfulness has one function and right effort has another function. If you want to do pure mindfulness practice, you have to ignore right effort, i.e., you see something unskillful coming up and you don’t do anything about it. But that doesn’t fit in with the way the Buddha taught. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration all have to work together if they’re going to get results. So you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath and you notice the mind is wandering off, you don’t just let it wander off. You bring it right back. And you try to figure out how you can keep it here. It’s not just through force of will. You want to make the breath comfortable so it’s more inviting, it’s more appealing, so you can actually generate the desire to stick with it. That’s part of right effort right there. And the more consistently you stay here, the more concentration develops. So all these factors—right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—have to work together if they’re going to gain any results. And it’s not necessary that you draw distinct lines between them. Bring them together. Then the mindfulness sloughs off into the concentration and the effort sloughs into the concentration, and the path all comes together. And the more intent you are in really observing what’s going on, bring all your wits to bear in trying to figure out what is this body, what is this mind, how do they interact in ways that, even though you want to find pleasure and want to find happiness in life, you keep running into suffering. Why is that? What are they doing? What are you doing with them? All the processes that you need to master in terms of dealing with the body and dealing with the mind, they’re right here. All the qualities that you need to develop, you’ve got them, at least in potential form, and you want to develop them. So this is why it’s important that you pay full attention to what you’re doing and be as consistent as possible in maintaining that attention, because otherwise there’ll be huge holes and gaps in your knowledge. And it may not seem like much. There’s lots of other things going on in the world right now. But what use is having knowledge about all those things in the world, if it’s all superficial? I mean, the stuff we read in newspapers and gain through the media. It’s all something that someone else wants us to know or wants us to think, to wonder exactly why. So that kind of knowledge is really questionable. The things you know best are the things that are happening right here, right now. And yet we don’t pay attention right here, right now, so we don’t really know them. But there is the potential for real knowledge if you really focus in, stay focused, value this practice. Don’t treat it casually. It’s the people who are really intent on these little things that come face to face with the big things in life. John Lee makes the comparison. He says, “When the Buddha became a great personality, he first made himself very small, focused in on his breath. So I was going to get to know this one thing really well, the mind focused on the breath, and develop all the skills that go around that. And you develop this not only by focusing on the breath, but focusing on the activities you have to do in the course of the day. Give things your full attention. Be deliberate. Be circumspect in what you’re doing. And those qualities of deliberation and circumspection will all connect, become more and more habitual, more and more reliable. So give this your full attention. John keeps saying,”What about what’s going on over there? How about if I do this? Or how about if I went there and skimmed around on the surface?” You want to really dig down in one spot. That’s how you get to know the deeper layers. And you realize that the important things anywhere are the important things right here, right now. So you’ve got this right here, right now, the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind thinking and aware. And if you want to get the full use out of these things, you’ve got to give them your full attention. It’s only in this way that you can break through your ignorance and see what’s on the other side. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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