Quality Control

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When you meditate, you’re asserting your ability to choose where you’re going to focus your attention. Because the mind, left to its own devices, wanders around checking up on this, checking up on that. It’s like someone wandering around a factory, checking up on the raw materials, checking up on the workers, going outside a bit, taking a smoke, looking at the sky, coming back in. It tends not to be all that systematic, and as a result, a lot of times the way it’s checking up on the factory is not all that helpful. You may notice that here, the mind is thinking, “Things aren’t coming out well. Quality control is totally chaotic.” And so for a while it goes in and checks quality control. Then it wanders off someplace else, and then quality control gets chaotic again. So what we’re doing as we’re meditating is to stick with quality control, to assert our ability to stay right here. Regardless of whatever else is coming up, you have the choice either to go there or not. Sometimes it seems like something pulls us away—pain in the body, loud noises, important work, that has to be done tomorrow. But it’s not that those things are pulling you away. You’re going for them. It’s simply the force of old habit that makes it seem that you’re being pulled. So you’ve got to learn how to resist that. You’re the one who’s establishing your frame of reference. So remind yourself of the fact that you do have that power. Stick with the body, feelings, mind states, and mental qualities. Ask yourself which is the most appropriate frame for you right now. Your default position should be the breath, because with the breath you have access to all four of those frames of reference. Stick with the body. The breath is an aspect of the body, and as you’re breathing there are going to be feelings and their mind states, watching the breath and the mental qualities that you bring to the practice. Either finding that you’ve got hindrances getting in the way, or that you actually are developing some of the factors for awakening. So everything centers in right here. John Lee often would talk about how with the breath you have all four in one. It’s up to you which aspect you’re going to focus on, but all four are in contact right here. You’ll see a similar process in the Buddhist teachings on the frames of reference, particularly the connection between keeping mindful of the body and exercising restraint over the senses. That’s body and dhammas, or mental qualities, right there, brought together. You begin to notice when the mind goes flowing out to sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation, or to ideas. In one case, it gives the image of a post. You’ve got all these different animals tied to the post. If they weren’t tied to the post, if you just took their leashes and tied the ends of the leashes together, then whichever animal happened to be strongest at that time, everybody else would get pulled in that direction. But when they’re all tied to a post and the post is firmly stuck into the ground, then they end up all just lying around the post because they can’t go anywhere else. In other words, your awareness of where the mind is going stays very close to the body. It doesn’t have to follow things out to wherever they might lead. If you find you have trouble sticking with any of the frames of reference, which are the primary themes of right concentration? The Buddha never drew a really clear line between concentration practice and mindfulness practice. They’re both aspects of one meditation practice. But if you find that the concentration practice and the mindfulness practice, any of these four frames of reference, are hard to stick with, the Buddha says you can stop for a while and think of some of the other topics of meditation, anything that you find inspiring. You can think about the Buddha. You can think about the Dhamma, the Sangha, your own generosity. You can think about your own virtue. You can think about the qualities you’ve developed that, as the Buddha said, can lead to a heavenly rebirth. You can find that inspiring. You can think about how death could come at any time and you have to be prepared. But it is possible to prepare. That’s a meditation that’s designed to overcome laziness. Not to get you depressed, actually, but to get you eager to practice as you develop heedfulness. It’s interesting when the Buddha gives examples in the Canon of how to generate the desire for right effort. This is also part of mindfulness and concentration practice. I was reading a book a while back that actually made the proposal that there was a right mindfulness practice and a right effort practice, and there were two different kinds of practice. If you’re doing right mindfulness practice, you usually just watch things coming and going, not interfere. But if you slip off and start trying to develop skillful qualities or get rid of unskillful qualities, you’ve lost mindfulness and you’re into right effort. It’s a very strange idea. Again, the Buddha didn’t make that kind of division. But an important part of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration is generating the desire to develop these skillful qualities. The two main ways in which the Buddha has you generate desire are developing heedfulness and a sense of pride. You develop heedfulness in realizing that there are dangerous dangers in waiting. And if you’re not careful, you create the dangers yourself. One of the worst dangers is to be mindful, mindless, heedless, totally scattered at the moment of death. So the Buddha has you develop heedfulness. Every time the sun goes down, he says, “Remind yourself, you could die tonight. This might be your last sunset. Are you ready to go? If not, what qualities of mind do you need to work on so you can face death without fear?” And the same with the sunrise. “This might be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? If not, what do you have to work on so you can face death without fear?” So when the Buddha recommends recollection of death, that’s what he’s recommending. Not that you get depressed over the fact that death could come at any time. You just kind of wipe out everything you’ve been doing, planning, hoping for in life. That’s a misuse of the contemplation. The proper use is realizing that there are some things that survive death and other things that don’t. The qualities of mind that you develop, those do survive. The actions you do, those survive. So that’s where you want to focus your efforts, where you want to focus your mind. The energy that you put into the practice. As for pride, it’s pride in workmanship. The Buddha often compares the practice to doing a skill well, and having that confidence that you can do it. One of the contemplations he recommends is just thinking about it. “Other people can do this. Why can’t I? They are human beings. I’m a human being. They can do it. So can I.” So on the one hand, it’s seeing the dangers of not developing skillful qualities and having confidence that you do have the ability to develop whatever needs to be developed to get to the end of the path. So if you find your practice getting lax, this might be a good thing to do. To contemplate, both to develop heedfulness and to develop that sense of pride and confidence that’s needed for the path. Then, as the Buddha said, if you find that you’ve developed a sense of confidence, well-being, the mind finally can settle down with this topic. Then you can go back to any of the four frames of reference. You keep directing your mind to those topics and you keep evaluating, “How well is the mind settling down?” This process of being alert to what’s going on and evaluating it, this is where mindfulness practice shades into concentration practice. It’s not that with concentration or strong states of jhana that you don’t think. First jhana, you have to think, direct a thought, evaluation. It’s a means of making sure that the mind can get in snug with its object and looking for any problems so that you can correct them. Again, this is like the quality control part of the factory. When you focus on the breath, where are you focusing? Is it a good place for you to focus? How’s the breath going at that spot? How would you know if it’s going well or not going well? Experiment. Try different things, different ways of breathing, different ways of conceiving the breath energy. Sometimes when the breath is coming up, up, up, as you breathe in, it gives you a headache. So think of it going down, down, down. Or vice versa, depending on what the body seems to need. And if you’re not familiar and sensitive with the body’s needs, just experiment. Play around for a while and see what results you get. This, too, is part of that ability to choose your topic. Once you’ve chosen the breath, the next question is, how do you choose the right breath and the right kind of breathing? You’re making the most of the fact that your experience of the present moment is shaped not only by past karma but also by present karma. Stuff from the past you can’t really control. But you do have a role to exert choice. You do have a role. You have the ability to make decisions in the present that really do make a difference right now. You don’t have to wait until your next lifetime to see the results of your actions right now. Some of them show up immediately. So you take advantage of that fact. If you find the mind slipping off, remind yourself you do have the choice. You can bring it back. You’re exercising your ability to shape what you’re experiencing right now. So even though the body may not be in good shape, you have the talent, you have the skill, or you’re working on the talent, you’re working on the skill, too. Take what may be a bad situation and make something good out of it. As John Lee says, that’s the sign of genuine discernment. If you’ve got a good situation and you make something good out of it, that’s ordinary discernment. But if you’ve got a bad situation, the body’s not well, there’s pain here and there, you want to exercise your discernment so you can make something good out of it. That’s where you see the value of discernment, the value of understanding that there are influences coming in from the past, but there’s also your choices that you’re making in the present moment. So explore that ability, because that’s what turns just sitting here trying to struggle with your breath, trying to struggle with whatever’s going on in the body. You get into sitting here and taking whatever comes your way and making it grist for the mill, grist for discernment, grist for concentration. So at your factory, regardless of what the raw materials are, you make something good out of them. It’s not just quality control, it’s also research and development. That’s where you want to focus your energies.

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