What to Trust & Respect Inside

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The first thing to do when you meditate is to get the body into position. Sit with your back straight, face forward, close your eyes, and place your hands in your lap. Then get your mind into position. We chanted just now, spreading thoughts of goodwill to ourselves and to others. To remind ourselves that what we want in life is true happiness. True happiness has to come from within, which is good in a way, but it’s also hard. Good in the sense that our true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with anyone else’s. Each of us has to look within. We don’t have to take anything away from anyone else to be truly happy. And when we find true happiness inside, we actually have more to share. The hard part is that it requires work. Because we’re looking for a happiness we can trust, a happiness that doesn’t change. You have to train the mind to be trustworthy, a mind that you can trust. That’s what we’re working on right now. Make up the mind that you’re going to stay with the breath, and then try to keep with that intention. Of course, it’s going to go wandering off, but you can bring it back. It’ll wander off again, but you’ll bring it back again. You want to show some respect for your desire for true happiness. This is why we respect the Buddha, because he taught us how to respect something that’s worthy of respect within ourselves. And so we take him as an example. He realized he wouldn’t let himself settle for anything less than a genuine happiness. And he showed that in doing that, you have to develop a lot of good qualities of mind. That’s why we train the mind. Right now we’re working on mindfulness and alertness. In other words, keeping the breath in mind, remembering to stay with the breath. That’s mindfulness. This is actually watching what’s happening. What are you doing? What are the results you’re getting? Are you staying with the breath or are you wandering off? And then the third quality, which is ardency, is that you really try to do this skillfully. That’s what develops the mindfulness. That’s what develops the alertness. Remind yourself that this is something you really want to do. You really do want to train the mind because you want a true happiness that doesn’t change. We’ve seen enough of the world to realize that there are a lot of happiness or pleasures out there that are not genuine, that are not trustworthy. So we want to look for something inside, something we can depend upon, that requires becoming more skillful in being mindful, more skillful in being alert. So to begin with, we focus on the breath. Keep the breath in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Don’t let yourself forget. And keep watch, both over the breath and over the mind. If you sense the mind’s beginning to wander off, come back to the breath again. A good way to keep the mind with the breath is to ask questions about it. What’s the most comfortable way of breathing right now? How does long breathing feel? Give it a try. If it feels good, stick with it. If not, you can try shorter breathing, or in shorter and out longer, in longer and out shorter, faster or slower, heavier or lighter, deeper or more shallow. This means you’re exploring the breath to see what potentials it has. Take stock of your own body. What does the body need right now? Is it feeling tired? Does it need more energy? Is it feeling tense? Breathe in a way that’s more relaxed. If there are pains in the different parts of the body, you don’t have to pay attention to them right now. Stay with whichever area of the body you can make comfortable through the breathing. Each time you slip off, come back. And when you come back, reward the mind. Ask yourself, “What one breath would feel really good right now?” Because there is a tendency, when you’re focusing on the breath, that things begin to get mechanical. You get into a particular rhythm and leave the breath on automatic pilot, and then the mind starts to wander off. So when you come back, do a little more exploring. What kind of breath would feel really good right now? And it’s in the coming back and the coming back that you, one, show respect for the meditation, for you need to train the mind, and two, you become more trustworthy to yourself. You’ve made up your mind you’re going to stay here, and then you really stick with it. This is important. It’s the truthfulness with which you stick to the practice that’s going to make all the difference. Because you make up your mind to do something, there are four qualities you need. One is discernment in deciding that you’re going to do something that’s really good, that really will lead to happiness. Then you also use your discernment in figuring out what’s going to get you there, what’s required. Once you figure that out, then the next quality is trust. It’s truthfulness. You really stick with it. Because sometimes the things you really want in life take effort. And it’s not the case that once you’ve made up your mind, the whole mind is going to be cooperating. You’ve got lots of different ideas in there. Your mind is like a big committee. Lots of different ideas, lots of different opinions, lots of different yous in there. So you have to sort them out, which ones are helpful, which ones are not. As for the ones that get in the way, you have to sit down and talk with them. Say, “Look, we’re here for true happiness.” Most of the unskillful members of the committee just want a really quick happiness. They don’t care whether it’s true or not. They just want some pleasure right away. You have to remind them that you’re going to suffer if the pleasure you get is something that just comes and goes. So you have to be really truthful in sticking with the practice. And again, use your discernment to deal with all the parts of the mind that aren’t cooperating. Learn to talk with them in a firm but friendly way, that we’re really here for something important. The third quality is relinquishment. There are things you have to give up. While you’re sitting here training the mind, there are lots of other things you might want to think about or things you want to plan for tomorrow. Or get up and do right now, but you can’t do that. You say, “Look, this is really important.” The Buddha said that a sign of wisdom is the ability to realize that there’s long-term happiness and there’s short-term happiness. And the wise person is willing to realize that when it comes to a choice like that, you’ve got to choose the long-term happiness and be willing to let go of the short-term. Our problem is that we want everything. All the different pleasures we can think of, we want them all, but some of them conflict. That’s why you have to make your choices. It’s like playing chess. You have to be willing to lose some of your pieces if you want to win the game. So you have to figure out what it is that you have to give up and learn how to talk yourself into being okay with that. The fourth quality is calm. As you approach this, you want to be calm and clear-headed all the way through. If you let yourself get upset easily, then you’ll see things clearly and you’ll find yourself way out in left field. You’re far away from the path. Just let your emotions take over. The unskillful members of the committee snuck in, threw a sack over you, and dragged you off. So this is where you have to develop patience. The Buddha once told his son, when he was teaching his son how to meditate—in fact, it was in his instructions—“Try to make your mind like the earth. People throw unpleasant things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t get upset. Someone can pour perfume on the earth, but the earth doesn’t get excited or pleased. The earth has to be calm.” This doesn’t mean you’re making your mind into a cloud of dirt. It simply means that you have to learn how not to react to things. Just keep yourself calm. Actually, put up with a lot more than you might have thought. For instance, while you’re sitting there may be a pain in your leg or knee. If you focus on how bad the pain is, it’s going to be hard to stay here. But you can focus on other parts of the body. Where is the breath comfortable? Stay right there. Focus on what’s going well. Then you’ll fade into the background. In fact, you can get to the point where once you’ve got some breath energy that feels good all the way in, all the way out. Think of it spreading throughout the different parts of the body, so the whole body is breathing. You’re not just breathing through the nose. Think of the breath as the energy suffusing your whole body and asking, “What’s the quality of that energy?” Or if it’s tense or tight, think of it relaxing. The comfort from the breathing can begin to spread throughout the different parts of the body. Think of that sense of ease and relaxation going all the way through the painful parts and out the other. If it’s in your leg, think of it going all the way down the leg and out through the toes. You can loosen up a lot of the tension around the pain, and you find that the pain becomes a lot easier to deal with. As the Buddha said, if you want to put an end to pain, it’s not something you push out. You have to learn how to comprehend it first. What is this pain? Why does it bother me? What am I doing to contribute to it? And to see that, you have to be really calm. And to be calm, you need a good, solid foundation. So we try to provide that foundation with the breath. This way, when you’re determined to do something good, like this, you use your discernment, you use your truthfulness. You learn how to let go of whatever gets in the way, and you learn how to maintain your calm. You find that you can trust the mind a lot more because you’re building trustworthy qualities into the mind. And you find that showing some respect for your desire for true happiness really does pay off. This was the whole message of the Buddha’s life. Don’t bother about finding anything that’s that reliable. Look around the world. What is there in the world? There’s nothing but just whatever pleasures you can grab. Of course, as a son of a really wealthy person, he had all the pleasures he could think of. So everybody was encouraging him to just go for that. He said, “No, it’s not good enough. There must be something better, because these pleasures are going to leave me.” And when they leave, they leave a bad taste in the mouth. You spend all that time just wallowing around in pleasures, and then you have nothing to show for it. And many times you do a lot of unskillful things in order to get those pleasures, and you’ve got those memories as well. So he had the wisdom to realize that even though things came easily to him in terms of sensual pleasures, he wasn’t going to fall for it. He wanted to do something better, find something better. Everybody else was saying, “This is as good as it gets.” He said, “No, it has to be better.” So he showed respect for his desire for true happiness, and then he brought it about by developing these trustworthy qualities in mind. That’s why we respect him, because he teaches us to respect something really trustworthy and reliable within ourselves. Respect for your desire to do happiness and try to develop your good qualities so you really can trust them. So that in this world where there’s so little that we can trust around us, at least we have something trustworthy inside, to the point where we reach a happiness that we know for sure is never going to leave. The Buddha says it’s possible. All the noble disciples say it’s possible. They’ve seen it. It’s not just possible, it’s real for them. For us, it’s just their word. But we owe it to ourselves to give their word a try.

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