Where to Look in the Present

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Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Establish your attention right there, right at the sensation of the breathing. Notice where you feel the breath. Notice the quality of the breath. You can feel it anywhere in the body. The same way that they can measure your brain waves in any part of the body. The breath has an effect on the whole nervous system. So try to see what way of breathing feels best for your nervous system. Settle down right here, and maintain the intention to stay here. That’s going to take some work, because there will be other intentions coming up. The thought will come into the mind, go off someplace else, and you have to say, “No, come right back here.” Sometimes the intention to stay here will be conscious, but most often it’ll be unconscious. You suddenly find yourself someplace else, and you wonder how you got there. Over the time being, you don’t have to wonder about how you got there. Just bring yourself back and reward yourself for coming back. Give yourself a really gratifying breath, something that feels good down through the torso, down into the heart, down into any part of the body that’s especially sensitive to the breath. The movement of the breathing. Just keep your eye out for the fact that the mind is probably going to slip off again. Try to catch the warning signs so you can tell when it’s beginning to lean in the direction of going someplace else. Then you can get it back onto the breath. That’s when you’re making progress in the meditation, when you can sense those signs and not just give in to them. Sometimes we’re told that you shouldn’t think of successful or unsuccessful meditation or good or bad meditation, but meditation is a skill. The whole concept of skill is basic to the Buddhist teachings. We are working on a skill here, which means you have to be observant and learn from the things. Keep in mind what you want to accomplish here. You do want to get the mind to settle down. You want it to be clear. You want it to have a sense of ease and well-being. The Buddha describes right concentration as including rapture as well. So those are the things you’re aiming at. The question is learning how to aim skillfully. In other words, how to keep your desired goal in mind and then actually work on the causes that’ll get you to that goal. That’s where your main attention has to be. Unfortunately, it’s right here, right here at the breath. You’re working on your intention. This is the big factor that shapes your life. This is why when you’re focusing in the present moment, it’s not just a general floating around kind of awareness of the present. You want to really be careful about where your intentions are. The best way to do that is to set up a single intention and then try to maintain it. That way you have some way of measuring the other intentions that move in and would try to push you in this direction or push you in that direction. If you don’t have a firm intention, you wander around and you really don’t know what’s happening. There’s no clear point of reference. But here the intention is to stay with the breath. And then to help that intention along, you try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Try to explore the way the breath energy feels in the body and the effect that it has on the different parts of the body. Is there any part of the body that feels especially starved of breath energy? Try to give it some energy. Any parts of the body that seem to be doing all the work in the breathing? Give them a vacation. Give them totally relaxed as you breathe in, totally relaxed as you breathe out, and see which other parts of the body will start picking up the slack. For a lot of us, the shoulders tend to be overworked. Different parts of the face tend to get overworked. So think of them relaxed. Relaxing and staying relaxed, with a sense of fullness and ease as you breathe in, as you breathe out. See how the breath has an effect on your posture and how your posture has an effect on the breathing. There’s lots to explore here. And if you learn how to take an interest into the issues of the breath energy in the body, that makes it a lot easier to maintain that original intention. You want to stay here and be on the lookout for any intentions to go someplace else. This is how the teaching on karma relates to the practice of meditation. Because karma is all about intention, the way intention shapes your present moment and the way it shapes things on into the future. When we’re meditating, we’re primarily focused on the intention. The issue of how your intention shapes the present moment, how your experience of the body, is going to change simply through the intention to stay with the breath in a skillful way. Now, you will run into the effects of past intentions. In other words, thoughts that just come popping into your mind. Or certain pains you have in the body. Certain habits that seem to keep going through a loop over and over again. But our main interest here is the difference we can make by changing our intention right now. Establishing a good intention, then maintaining that good intention. Because there’s a lot to be learned by focusing on the intention. You get to see the movements of the mind, and you begin to realize that the more you exercise the choice to do the skillful thing, the more freedom you have, the more clarity there is in the mind. Because it’s right around the element of intention and attention that you’re going to see all the important things that you need to see in the mind for the sake of gaining freedom. So this is why we’re focused here, and this is where we’re focused in the present moment. It’s not because the present moment is a wonderful moment, because a lot of times you can think of lots of present moments that were not very pleasant or wonderful. But it’s because it’s the important moment. It’s right here that you can make a difference in your life. It’s right here that you can gain an understanding as to why is there suffering, why is there stress, what can be done about it. It’s always good to be very clear that when you’re in the present moment, it’s not just an openness to whatever comes up. You have to have an underlying intention for what you’re doing here. And you want to learn how to examine that intention more and more carefully. In the beginning, it’s wise not to focus too directly on the intention, just focus on the breath. The breath is easier to focus on and it gives you a lot to work with. But as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, the breath gets more refined, the movements of the mind will come more and more to the fore than the quality of the intention, which is going to be influenced by the perceptions you have and influenced by the feelings you have, influenced by the things you pay attention to. All these things will become more and more clear. So if anything else comes up in the present moment, for the time being, just let it pass. Let it pass. Any outside sounds, outside distractions, inside distractions, whatever. You just want to stay right here with the breath. With the sensation of the breath coming in, the sensation of the breath going out, the sensation of the breath energy in the different parts of the body. That’s there all the time, regardless of whether the breath comes in or the breath goes out. There’s lots of different kinds of breath energy in the body to explore. Just maintain your attention to stay tuned in to the breath. Don’t tune into other things. Because this is the station that has all the interesting news. Right now.

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