What You Bring to the Meditation

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Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how it feels. Does it feel good? If it feels good, keep it up. Feeling labored, you can change your rhythm. You can shorten the in-breath, or you can shorten the out-breath, or you can shorten both of them. Make them heavier or lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. Try to get a sense of what really feels good. When they make up your mind, you’re going to stay with the breath. This requires that you bring a couple of qualities of mind to this project. One is mindfulness. You have to remember not to wander off. That’s what mindfulness is, keeping in mind the fact that this is where you want to stay. Other thoughts will come up, but you have to keep reminding yourself, “No, you’re not going to go with them. You want to stay with the breath. You want to explore the breath energy here.” Then you have to be alert. Notice what you’re doing. Notice how things are going with the breath. Notice when the mind is beginning to wander away. Sometimes it seems to go in a flash. Other times it’s a more gradual process. It begins to lose a little interest in the breath and starts casting around for something else to do. If you detect that happening, take another good, long, deep in-and-out breath. Try to find a way of breathing that feels really gratifying. If you notice that you have wandered off, just come right back. That requires a third quality, which is ardency. In other words, you really want to do this well. It’s not just a matter of saying, “Well, if it happens, it happens. And if it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen.” That attitude is not going to get you anywhere. The attitude has to be, “I want to make sure this works.” We’re here to train the mind. At the end of the hour, you want to be able to say, “Well, I learned something.” It may not have been what you expected to learn, but always view the opportunity to sit and meditate as a learning opportunity. Some days you may learn what a distracted mind is like, and you don’t learn that simply to accept the fact that it’s happening. I mean, while it’s happening, if you can’t figure out any way to deal with it, just say, “Well, try to be with at least part of the mind on the breath as the rest of the mind goes ranting and raving about whatever it’s worked up about.” But the purpose here is to figure out how you can cut through those problems. It’s like in the old days when they learned Russian in order to figure out the Russians. Not because they wanted to be friendly with the Russians, because they regarded the Russians as their enemies. But you had to learn Russian if you wanted to understand them. It’s the same with the distractions in the mind. You have to study them if you want to get past them. You’re not studying them in order to accept them and love them and think nice thoughts about them. We’re trying to figure them out. Why do these distractions have such power over the mind? So this is where the quality of ardency comes in. You really want to stay with the breath, and you want to stay with it skillfully. You want to learn something here. You want to master a skill. The ardency in turn requires four other qualities. The first one is simply that you really have to want to do it well. You realize that the mind is in a mess if it’s not trained, and that you’re causing problems not only for yourself but for other people if you allow your mind to stay untrained. And you realize that what you need is some peace of mind. You have to want that. You have to want it in such a way that you don’t destroy the peace. But at the same time, you do have to put the effort in. That requires the desire. Even though the desire starts on the results that you want, you have to learn how to change the focus slightly and learn how to desire the causes, whatever is required to do this. And that requires persistence. That’s the second quality. The Buddha calls it the four bases of success and the four bases of power. Here we’re talking about the power of your concentration, success in your concentration. Desire is the first. Persistence is the second. It can also mean energy. You really put your effort into it. Now, this doesn’t mean that you have to stress and strain all the time. It simply means that you keep at it. You learn what level of energy you can apply. In a way that’s consistent, you hold steadily with the breath and try not to let there be any lapses. You figure out what needs to be done, and then you try to do it. That figuring out requires the other two bases of success. The first one is citta, or intentness. You really pay careful attention. You pay attention to what you’re doing, what’s going on. You’re not just going through the motions. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the mind is comfortable or uncomfortable with the breath. Whether it feels well-settled or it doesn’t feel well-settled, you have to pay attention. And then you have to notice that things are not going well. Why? Try to figure it out. Is it a problem with the breath? Is it a problem with the mind? And then use your ingenuity. If things are not going well, try this, try that. Maybe you’re not focused in the right spot. If you find being focused in the head is giving you headaches, move your focus down into the throat, into your chest, down to the abdomen. If the process of breathing feels laborious, ask yourself, “How do you perceive it? Do you feel that you have only this little tiny hole in the nose to get the breath in and out?” How about if you think of the breath energy as coming in and out all the pores? Because it does. And it is breath energy we’re focusing on here. It’s not just the air coming in and out. We’re focusing on the energy flow in the body, and that goes through all the nerves. It goes through all the blood vessels, out to each pore of your skin. So think of all the pores being opened up so that when you breathe in, energy can come in from any direction. See what that does. So it’s the qualities of mind that you bring to the practice that really make all the difference. Because the breath is pretty much the same breath. You can change it a little bit to make it more comfortable. But what really makes the difference is the mindset that you bring to the practice. Now, this may seem paradoxical as we’re trying to train the mind. So why does it require good qualities? Because you can’t get good qualities of the mind to grow without having some good qualities already there. Fortunately, we all have good qualities to some extent. We just take the good qualities we have and we learn how to use them. We learn how to develop them, how to make them grow. So these are all the aspects of ardency—the desire, the persistence, the intentness of your focus, the intentness of your attention, and then your ingenuity, your ability to analyze the problem, figure it out, and try a new solution. And then figure out whether it’s working. If it’s not working, then you try again. All these things work together. So it’s not just in-out, in-out. The mind is growing. The mind is feeding itself with its own good qualities, using the breath as its focal point. So you really do learn things in the course of the session. This is basically what we’re here for. We’re here to learn. Sometimes the results come out the way we want. Sometimes they don’t. At the end of the session, if you felt that something did go especially well, try to remember, “Well, what was it that went well?” Which means, of course, that you have to be attentive all the way through so that you can remember, “When it went well, where were you focused? What was the quality of the breathing? What was the quality of your awareness of the body as a whole?” Try to remember that and see if you can recreate it the next time around. If things are not going well, just sit and watch. Try to figure out what’s happening. Try a few different approaches. Pull out all the tricks in your bag. And if nothing works and you say, “Well, just sit and watch. Maybe there’s something new I can learn here. Maybe there’s something I didn’t notice before.” You find many times as you meditate that there seem to be periods of progress, and then you seem to find yourself back at square one. Well, it’s time to go over the old territory again. Maybe there was something you missed the first time around. So it’s good to reflect on the basics, both the basic and the experienced, to remind yourself exactly where you are, what you’re doing, what the territory is. You’ve probably had the experience of losing something and walking over a piece of ground several times. Maybe about the fourth or fifth time, you find it. It’s the same place you’ve been walking, looking, but this time you notice it. It’s the same with the meditation. We just go back and forth over the breath again, in and out, in and out. But you discover that there are different things to see, details you may have missed before, connections you may have missed. So it’s the same territory over and over again, right here at the breath, where the mind and the body meet here in the present moment. But you find that if you look at it repeatedly and use these qualities, mind, the body, the mindfulness and alertness, and the four things that help to develop your ardency—the desire, the persistence, your intentness, and your ingenuity—you find that you bring these qualities in different mixtures, in different sessions. Maybe just a slight change in the quality you bring to the practice will enable you to see something you didn’t see before. It was there, staring you. Right in the face, all the time. So even though it’s the same territory, there’s always something new to see. So pay careful attention. There’s always something to learn.

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