Wandering Mind

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Getting focused on the breath is not all that hard. It’s right there. It’s right here in the body. This energy that swells up in the body and, as it does so, pulls the air into the lungs and then lets it go out. It’s that upwelling energy that you want to focus on, keeping in mind that this energy can flow anywhere in the body and from any direction. The hard part is staying with the breath, because the mind has a tendency to want to wander around. It looks at something for a while and says, “Okay, I know this,” and then you move on to something else and something else. And so it’s learning how to stay with the breath. With the breath, it’s just one object out of many in the buffet here. It’s not going to have that much impact on the mind to be with the breath. It’s learning how to stay here, keep it here, keep it here, keep it here, not let it get distracted. That’s the important thing. And different people will find that different techniques work. You need to be both mindful and alert, and apply ardency to both of those qualities. Mindfulness is the ability to stay with something, keep something in mind. If you’re going to keep the breath in mind, then you may have an image of the breath, or just the word breath, as a sign that you can hold onto. As your little marker to remind yourself that this is where you want to be. Alertness is watching what’s going on. Watching what’s going on with the breath, watching what’s going on with the mind. Noticing what you’re doing, noticing what’s coming about as a result. And the ardency is the quality that keeps you with this. It tries to get your alertness really sharp, very quick. It tries to keep your mindfulness solid. That ability to remember that this is what you’re here for is to stay with the breath. Not to plan tomorrow’s work projects, not to mull over the day, not to go skipping off to some fantasy. You’re here to get the mind concentrated. And whatever techniques work, that’s something you have to explore for yourself, because different people find different things work for them. For some people, if it’s just in, out, in, out, in, out, it gets really boring. So you’ve got to work with the breath energy in the different parts of the body, right from the very beginning. Ask yourself, “How’s the breath in the middle of the head? How’s the breath in the middle of the chest? How’s the breath in the abdomen?” Wander around for a while in the body and sense it for the way the breath energy flows in different parts. Which areas seem to be flowing in a harmonious way? Which ones seem to be working at cross-purposes? If you have some physical condition that’s not quite right, maybe a pain in the back or a problem in the heart, how do you breathe in a way that actually is healing for that condition? I noticed that of Ajahn Fuang’s students, the ones who really stuck with the meditation, even after he passed away, were the ones who had health problems. They had realized that they needed the breath just in order to stay healthy. And that gave them an extra boost, an extra impetus, in really wanting to stay with the breath and know it well. Other people find that examining a breath like this from the very beginning is actually distracting. If the mind moves around too much, it just starts moving away and away and off into Mars and Saturn or something. In a case like that, you remind yourself, “I have one spot that I really want to look after.” And limit your awareness to that spot. Don’t clamp down on it. Allow the breath to come in and out of that spot from every direction. But don’t go wandering off to check other parts of the body. This is something that really varies from person to person, and you have to try different techniques to see what works for you. When the breath gets comfortable, you have to be especially careful, because it’s so easy when the breath gets comfortable for the mind to start drifting off. If you find that happening, you have to come back. And that’s when you tell yourself, “Okay, now I’ve got to do work.” If you’ve been focusing just on one spot and it gets comfortable and you’re beginning to lose focus, that’s when you have to expand the range of your awareness. Whatever it is that keeps you interested in the breath and keeps you active. And you have to expect that the mind will have a tendency to wander off. After all, it’s been doing that for a long time. And the trick is to notice the signs. When can you tell that the mind is about to wander off? When it’s half interested in the breath? When it’s beginning to show an interest in something else? Can you detect it? If your mind has a tendency to lie to itself, this is where you really have to fight that tendency. Often there are just little blips that, in the beginning, don’t amount to much. A little image of some spot far away, or something that happened today, or something that’s happened tomorrow. It’s just a blip for a minute, and you’re back to the breath. But it may be a sign that the mind is beginning to extend its tentacles already, that it’s going to reach out and grab onto that and pull you off. It’s when you notice that happening that you have to exert extra mindfulness, extra alertness. In other words, be more ardent about the whole thing. And if you’re losing interest in the breath, you can ask yourself, “Okay, what’s wrong? What am I not examining here?” Because the flow of the energy through the body is something that can be very complex. And if the breath is too mild, too gentle, that may be the reason why you’re losing interest. So pump a little more energy into it. You also might ask yourself, “At which part of the breath cycle do you tend to leave?” Some people tend to leave right at the end of a breath, or with the out-breath. Their energy expands with the in-breath and depletes with the out-breath. Their awareness expands with the in-breath and depletes with the out-breath. And when it’s depleted, then it goes. So if that’s the case, you have to be extra alert as the breath goes out that you’re not going to allow your awareness to shrink. Or to deflate with the body. In other words, you have to learn how to read your own mind. Because this is the mind you’ve got to train. It has its own peculiarities. We can learn about the basic principles from the books or listening to Dhamma talks. But the specific ins and outs of your own mind, those are something you have to learn to observe yourself. So these are some of the questions you have to ask. What is it that makes the mind ready to wander? How can you catch it before it wanders? At which parts do you have to be extra alert, on your guard? Because this wandering mind can cause all kinds of trouble. There have been a number of deaths in the community recently. That’s something you always want to keep in mind. If your mind is wandering when you’re dying, who knows where it’s going to go off to? The body’s going to be weaker. If you’re grabbing at memories, fears, worries, that makes the mind weaker, too. When the mind is weak, mindfulness and alertness go down. When your mindfulness and alertness go up, you’re not on top of things. It’s just going to be like sitting here meditating and your mind wandering off, although the places the mind can go to, the wanderings, can be a lot more frequent and a lot stronger and a lot more compelling, especially when you realize you can’t stay in this body anymore. There’s going to be a craving for something else, somewhere else. And if your mindfulness and alertness are weak, who knows where, it’s going to take you. So this is one of the most important skills you need to develop, this ability to keep on top of the mind and keep it focused. If it’s going to go someplace, you want it to be on your terms. If you realize there are things you have to think about, duties you have to take care of, okay, you can plan for them. And then when you see that the thinking has accomplished its aims, okay, you bring it back. Or if you see that you can’t think through a problem right now because the mind is dull, you can bring it back to the breath and tell yourself, “I’ll get back to that after I’ve had another dose of good concentration.” But aside from that, you don’t want to go anywhere else. You have to learn how to lay down some laws for the mind here and stick to them. Mindfulness is what remembers the terms of the agreement, and alertness is what keeps watch to make sure that you stick with them. And so as you go through the stage in the meditation where the mind has this tendency to wander, don’t think of it simply as an irritant. There are important lessons you’re going to learn. As the mind wanders off, it’s creating a little state of becoming, a little world. And you’re going to move into that world and take on an identity. That’s what becoming and birth are all about. And here’s your chance to watch it and to exert some control over it so it doesn’t go to crazy places. So important things are happening here. This is dependent-core arising showing its stages. But if you’re not alert enough, if you’re not mindful enough, you won’t see anything. You’ll be here and all of a sudden someplace else. So remind yourself, this is an important skill to develop. And whether it takes a long time or it takes a short time to master it, it’s not the issue. The important thing is that you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. It’s that unwillingness to give in that’s going to make all the difference.

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