The Observer

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When you bring the mind to the breath and try to keep it there, you’re actually focusing on two things at once. One is the breath, and the other is the mind. This is the double function of alertness. John Lee compares it to a pulley, a rope over a pulley. You pull it this way and you pull it that way. You have to pay attention both to the breath and to the mind. In the beginning, this is the function of alertness and evaluation. You’ve got to look at how the mind is going, look at how the breath is going. How does the breath feel right now? If it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. And your only concern about the mind at the moment is that it’s right here watching the breath. If you begin to find that it’s pulling away, you’ve got to bring it right back as quickly as you can, as soon as you notice that it’s wandering off. You’ve got to let go of whatever that other interest is and come back to the breath. You can’t let the mind just wander around for a while or say, “Well, let me finish this thought and then I’ll come back.” Thoughts don’t finish. They morph into other thoughts and other thoughts. So just leave them where they’re loose ends dangling and come back to the breath. In the beginning, this is difficult. Often you’ve wandered way off before you realize what’s happened. But this ability to bring the mind to observe both the breath and the mind at the same time is one of the important skills you have to develop as a meditator, because you need the breath as a foundation. And you need to be able to watch the mind with some objectivity. Have a sense of the observer as something separate from the activity of the mind. And that can get you out of a lot of trouble. Otherwise, you get all entangled in your thoughts. And when you begin to notice that the mind is misbehaving, then you get upset, because you’re entangled in its misbehavior. But if you can step back a bit and watch the mind, “Oh, now the mind’s going here and now the mind’s going there,” and bring it back, bring it back, bring it back, without any recrimination, without any, without any skillful mental states, then you’re in a better position to observe what’s actually going on in the mind. And you don’t have to be a slave to its moods. Part of the mind is observing the mood, and the part of the mind that’s involved in the mood, keep those as separate as possible. Because if you’re tied up in the mood, then it’s really sticky. And you can’t see clearly. You can’t figure out, “Well, how do you get out of this? Where did this come from? Where is it going?” You’re just in the midst of it. But when you can pull out a bit, you begin to see, “Okay, what caused the mood to begin with?” And you begin to see if there’s something you can do to change it. That’s fine. And if it’s just the force of old karma that’s making itself felt, well, you can learn how to sit with it, learn how to develop some patience, secure in the knowledge that at some point that old karma is going to have to end. And the less you get involved with it right now, the less you’re going to be continuing it. So you just note that it’s there, but you try to have your separate part that you can observe the coming and goings of the moods. This helps with two things. One, just in the present moment you suffer a lot less. And this ability to maintain this separate observer as you go through the day is the factor that keeps your meditation continuous so that you develop some momentum from one sit to the next to the next. Just one little blast of meditation, followed by total inertia, and then another blast. That doesn’t build up any momentum. But if you have this sense of continuity of the observer going through the day, this is what makes the whole day become a part of your time to meditate. Jon Foong used to talk about how we tend to divide up our days. Right now is the time to work in the kitchen. Right now is time to eat. Right now is time to clean up. Right now is time to do this, do that. And then, oh, now is the time to meditate. Well, the time to meditate is only a tiny fraction of the day, if that’s the way you approach it. But if every time is a time to meditate, then, as he said, your practice becomes timeless. While you’re working in the kitchen, you’re meditating. While you’re cleaning up, you’re meditating. While you’re eating, while you’re whatever, you’re meditating. There’s a sense of the observer watching what’s going on and keeping things on a short leash. And if you can’t control the thoughts of the mind, at least you control the sense of the observer watching them, that you don’t have to go running along with them. And you find that if you can maintain this sense of being separate from the thoughts, their arc is a lot shorter. It’s like a boomerang that goes shorter and shorter distances before it comes back. As you learn how to observe the thoughts this way, then you begin to see how they come, how they go, which part is the force of your past karma and which part is the force of your current decisions, your current karma. You find that your current karma has lots of layers. It’s what seems to be the force of just something coming in and that’s totally uncontrollable in the mind. As you get to know these thoughts better, you begin to see, “Oh, there was a point where you decided to go along with it and gave it a little boost.” That’s what gives it its energy right now. This is one of the insights that comes from meditating. Trying to catch the mind as quickly as possible. Because you begin to see that the mind gives signals before it’s going to go. And if you’re playing along with the signals, part of playing along is trying to hide it from yourself, to pretend that you hadn’t made that decision to go wandering off and thinking about this, that, or the other thing. When you begin to catch the mind, you begin to see, “Oh, the mind is playing tricks on itself. This is how it hides things from itself.” And you learn how not to play along with that. Then you get closer and closer to the point where the thought actually began, where it began to take root in the present moment. And you can catch it when it’s just a little sprout. And before it even becomes a real thought, it’s just a stirring in your awareness. It’s neither really mental nor physical. It’s on the boundary line between the two. That’s where the mind is a lot more solid. You gain insight and you gain tranquility at the same time, just by learning how to watch these things and not play along. So try to develop this skill of watching both the breath and your mind. Making the breath comfortable gives you an ally in the present moment so that you’re not so hungry for those thoughts. When you’re well-fed with the breath, you’re much less inclined to go nibbling on thoughts. That’s what usually happens when you nibble on the thoughts. They turn around and they gobble you up. But the breath is good. You nibble on the breath and the breath doesn’t turn around and harm you in any way. It’s a reliable friend. It’s one of those friends who may not be flashy, but turns out to be the sort of person you can trust. you

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