The Mind When Trained Brings Happiness

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OK, get your body in position to meditate. Sit up straight. Put your hands on your lap. Face forward. Close your eyes. And then get the mind in position to meditate. Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. It might be at the tip of the nose, it might be in the motion of the chest as it rises and falls, or in the abdomen, in the shoulders—anywhere where you have some sensations that let you know, “Now the breath is coming in. Now it’s going out.” Allow the breath to have some freedom. In other words, don’t tighten up around the breath. Rhythm of breathing would feel really good right now. Would it be longer breathing or shorter? Or you can try in-long and out-short, or in-short and out-long. How about deeper or more shallow? Heavier or lighter? Which part of the body, breathing, feels good? Does it feel good to be breathing mainly in the abdomen or mainly in the shoulders? Mainly with the chest. Try to explore the sensation of breathing right here, right now. That’s where you’re going to try to keep the mind for the hour, with the sensation of the breath. And if the breath doesn’t feel comfortable, it’s going to be hard to stay. At the same time as you’re exploring how the breathing feels, it gives you something to take an interest in. It’s not just a mechanical process and you’re not just tying your mind down. You’re trying to figure out, how does this breathing process affect the body? How does it affect the mind? What way of breathing would feel really gratifying right now? And you’ll notice that the needs of the body will change. Maybe for a while long breathing feels good, but then after a while the body doesn’t need that. So you’re allowed to get a little bit shorter, a little bit more shallow. Whatever feels just right. And you can kind of trace through the body how the breathing feels. You might let your awareness go down the back, out the legs. Start at the back of the neck again and go down the shoulders, out the arms. Down the front of the body, around the head, in the neck. If you sense any tension or tightness associated with the breath, allow it to relax so that no tension builds up as you breathe in and you’re not holding on to any tension as you breathe out. Allow your ankles to relax, allow your wrists to relax, any part of the body that tends to hold tension. Consciously relax it. If you’re not sure if something is tense or not, you can compare the left side to the right side. Your left shoulder and your right shoulder. Your wrists, left wrist and right wrist. The same with the legs, the same with the back. Whichever side seems to be holding more tension, allow that side to relax. After you’ve surveyed the body for a while, choose one spot in the body to focus your awareness, where the breath is clear and where it seems easy or natural to be focused. Then let your awareness spread out from that spot to fill the whole body. So you’re aware of the whole body all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out-breath. If you can maintain that centered but broad awareness, keep it up. If things start getting blurry, you can start your survey of the body again. So even though the mind is moving around, it’s right here inside the body and not wandering out. It’s here in the present moment, not wandering off to the past or the future. We’re using the breath here to train the mind to develop some useful qualities. The first one is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you’re reminding yourself each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, that this is where you want to be. And then there’s alertness, which, if the mind wanders off, means you catch it and release it as quickly as you can, and you bring it right back. And then while you’re with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Be alert to the whole body. The third quality is ardency, which means that you try to do this as skillfully as you can. You want the mind to settle down and have a sense of well-being right here. Because when the mind has been trained in these qualities, you can use them in all kinds of activities. You don’t need mindfulness only when you meditate. You don’t need alertness only when you meditate. These are things that are useful whatever you’re going to do. When the mind is trained like this, it’s more under your control. It doesn’t go around creating a lot of problems. You may have noticed in those chants we had just now, there’s a real contrast. There’s one chant talking about aging, illness, and death are unavoidable. Separation is unavoidable. And then there’s a chant that follows up that says, “May I be happy.” That desire for happiness is something we all share. Everybody wants to be happy, even common animals like pleasure. Yet the problem is, many of the things we do for the sake of happiness turn around and bite us and cause us pain and suffering. We end up looking for happiness in things that will grow old and will grow sick and will die, that we’re going to be separated from. And so, instead of finding the happiness we want, we end up just causing more trouble. As the Buddha said, we’re intoxicated. We’re intoxicated with youth. We’re intoxicated with our health. We’re intoxicated with life. We forget that these things are not going to last. And it’s the wise person who realizes that you’ve got to find another basis for your happiness. Because otherwise, when aging, illness, and death come, the mind is going to be totally lost. This is especially true in a society like ours, where everybody seems to be obsessed with being young and healthy, and they don’t want to think about death at all. Old people are put away in an old people’s home, so you don’t have to see them. When death comes to our mind, we shove it out. We don’t want to think about it. But the Buddha says these things are things you can actually prepare for so that you don’t have to suffer from them. And the main thing that prevents us from suffering is having the mind trained so that it doesn’t go looking for happiness in all the wrong places. You may have noticed how much we bow down around here. You may wonder why we’re showing so much respect for the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha. It’s because they teach us to respect something within ourselves—our ability to find true happiness, our desire for true happiness. The Buddha doesn’t say that these are bad things or that they’re selfish. On the contrary, he says if you look for true happiness, if you do it right, you’re going to be helping other people as well. You’re going to be less of a burden on them, and you’ll be developing good qualities that you can share with them. Like generosity and virtue, the discernment that you develop from training the mind. And true happiness is something that is within our capabilities. So we have to look carefully at where we’re looking for our happiness, because there are some forms of happiness that, if you pursue them, are going to get in the way of true happiness. So you have to be willing to let them go. And focus on the qualities of the mind that really will take you to a happiness that’s solid and secure. The state of mind that, when aging comes, doesn’t go thrashing around. When illness comes, it doesn’t go thrashing around. It doesn’t even thrash around when death comes, because it’s found something really solid inside that aging, illness, and death can’t touch. The only way you can find that something solid is by getting the mind really still and getting its discernment really sharp. And this is how we start out, by training the mind in these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. And forcing the mind into the state of mindfulness, alertness, and attention, the path doesn’t save all of its pleasures and all of its good things for the end. There’s a sense of well-being that we can create as we’re following the path, as you’re focusing on the breath right here, right now. You can make the breath really comfortable. When there’s a sense of well-being in the body, the mind can settle down with a sense of confidence, a sense of security. And even though this isn’t the deathless happiness, it’s a lot better than most of the pleasures we tend to go running after. And it’s totally blameless. It doesn’t harm us, it doesn’t harm anybody else. And it’s the kind of pleasure that actually clarifies the mind. In most cases, our pleasures make the mind murky. Again, it’s like being intoxicated. You see something you like and you go after it. And as for the drawbacks of that pleasure, you don’t want to look at them. One of the forest teachers compared it to a bear trying to get honey out of a honeycomb. The bees are trying to sting its eyes, so it has to close its eyes and just go into the honeycomb and put up with all the stings because it wants the honey. Most of us go for the honey and we try to ignore all the stings. They come with the pleasures of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. The really unskillful things we do in order to get those kinds of pleasures. The problem is that the pleasure comes and it goes, and then what are you left with? You’re left with that karma. You’re left with that state of mind that’s hungry for these things and wants more. So as we meditate, we’re giving the mind something better to feed on. A sense of well-being inside that doesn’t require that you take anything from anyone else. You don’t have to fight anybody off for it. This is your own breath. Nobody else is going to try to move in and take it away from you. So take this opportunity to look for a happiness that’s really reliable, that’s really safe, and totally blameless, free from any kind of harm. And even though the pleasure of concentration is not the ultimate, it’s a step in the right direction. So have a refuge for the mind when life changes, when the mind changes. When youth ends, when health ends, and when life itself ends, we’ll have a happiness that’s secure.

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