Circumspection

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That’s a quality that Chan-li talks about quite a lot when he talks about the practice. The Thai word is rob khob, English “circumspection.” You look all around yourself. That’s literally what it means. When you’re focused on the breath, you have to be very circumspect in looking at what you’re doing, evaluating what you’re doing, and making adjustments. And you also have to look around yourself to make sure that nothing comes in and knocks you off. It’s good to keep it in mind. Part of the mind is with the breath, part of the mind is watching the mind itself. Chan-li’s image is of a pulley, a rope and a pulley that can go in either direction. You watch the breath for a bit, and then you turn around and keep an eye on the mind. Make sure the mind is with the breath. And notice the quality of your attention. You really want to pay careful attention to what you’re doing. At the same time, look at yourself from all sides. When things are going well, the quality of circumspection will meld in with the focus on the breath. But as you’re settling down, you have to keep an eye on several things at once. They all boil down to two things, i.e., the breath and the quality of the mind. The problem is that there are qualities in the mind. You’ve got a whole nest of things in there, and you’ve got to watch out for them. Some things are good and some things are harmful. Some of your intentions are in line with staying with the breath, and others are not. One of the ways of dealing with this is to get really, really into it. Get interested in the breath. See that there are many, many levels. It’s just like the currents in the ocean. Some of the currents go really fast, and others are deeper and they go very slow. There’s a current that sinks down in the South Atlantic and takes several hundred years to get up to the North Atlantic. It’s the same with the breath and the body. They’re quick breaths and they’re slow breaths. It has nothing to do with the in-and-out breath. It has to do with the quality of the movement in the body, the movement and the energy. Some of the energy is very still. Some of it stays in place. Some of it moves around. Some of it moves so quickly that as soon as you start thinking of the in-breath, there are currents that are already going through the whole body. Others move more slowly. So pay very careful attention to the breath. Get really interested in the breath. A good way of doing this is to notice that your health improves as the breath energy improves. So if you find that you’ve got an illness of some kind, or there’s a weakness in the body, or you have a tendency to be tired, look at the way the breath can help you. This involves some experimentation. And John Lee himself had to experiment. But that’s how he came across method two. He went out into the woods and he realized that he couldn’t hear Chiang Mai. He was actually quite a ways from Chiang Mai. He had to walk in for three days. And as soon as he got there, he started having some fainting spells, high fevers. And in retrospect, it looks like he probably had a heart attack. So what did he have for medicine? Not much, but he had the breath. So he worked with the breath to see how that might help his condition. And by the end of the three months of the rains, he was able to walk out. So if you have any kind of physical problem, think of using the breath to alleviate it. Even if you can’t cure the illness, at least you can alleviate some of the pain, some of the stiffness, some of the whatever that’s troublesome in the body. And even if you don’t have any recurring illnesses, remember that illness can come at any time. You want to be prepared. So try to keep the breath energy as healthy as possible. Get as sensitive as you can to what kind of energy gives you more energy when you need it, what kind can be relaxing when you need to be relaxed. The more sensitive you are to the breath, the more it’s going to reward you. Other times you’ll find that you just cannot get focused on the breath because there are other things in the mind that are harassing you. That’s when you have to look at your outer defenses. So you can see the drawbacks of whatever it is that’s pulling you away. Learning how to recognize a hindrance when it comes, recognize a defilement when it comes, for what it is, and not get so easily sucked in. Strengthen your mindfulness to keep the hindrances away. Strengthen your ability to analyze what’s skillful and what’s not skillful in the mind, to recognize something unskillful when that’s the way it is, and then find something skillful to replace it. If you have trouble staying with the breath, you might find some other topics that are of concentration or helpful, at least for the time being. The recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, recollecting your generosity at the times you’ve really been good and being helpful to others when you didn’t have to. That’s useful for when you’re feeling discouraged in the practice, when things are getting dry. Recognition of death, when you’re getting lazy. There are lots of things you can think about that can get the mind on course. This is one of the reasons why we have these various chants before the meditation. The world is swept away. It does not endure. As soon as your thoughts go out to the world, remember, everything you’re thinking about is going to be swept away at some point. It offers no shelter. Wherever you’re looking for a place to hide out and have some pleasure, that shelter can get blown away. You have nothing of your own. Everything you can grab onto and hold onto as being you or yours is going to be taken away, and you’re slave to craving. The chant keeps pushing and pushing and pushing the mind. These are good things to reflect on. It’s good to develop a sense of sanghvega for the various pleasures of the world. Sometimes the mind begins to wander out and think, “Well, I’ve looked at the breath enough for the time being. What else is there out there?” Well, that’s a lot of sanghvega. The breath protects the mind that stays with the breath. It needs this outer shell. The Buddha talks about the functions of the various frames of reference when you’re doing breath meditation. It’s not like you focus on the breath and then you drop the breath and you go focus on something else. You begin to realize that there are these various layers that surround the breath. You’ve got the breath itself, and then you’ve got the feelings that are associated with the breath. You try to make them as pleasant, refreshing, and as steadily pleasant and steadily refreshing as possible. Remember, the Buddha talks about feeling not so much as a random crapshoot, but they’re ways that you focus on feeling potentials in the body, feeling potentials in the mind, and you can encourage them. So you deliberately encourage the pleasant ones. The ones that give rise to a sense of refreshment. And then you’ve got the seda, or the mind, that’s focused on the breath, which may or may not be as settled as you’d like it, but that’s something to be aware of as well. Then finally there are the dhammas, which primarily have to do with that outer shell or layer that I was talking about, the protective layer that fends off any hindrances and tries to develop the look after the state of the mind. So there are four levels, all sort of like concentric circles. There’s a soft, chewy center and a nice, hard protective layer outside. It’s like one of those Tootsie Roll lollipops they used to have. So everything you need to know about is right here. It’s all centered around the breath, or revolves around the breath. So as you’re focused on the breath, there are these other layers that protect you, that surround the breath, that bring everything into alignment. So whichever layer you need to focus on in order to get the mind to be with the breath, realize there’s a range of approaches and a range of problems, but they’re all on these four levels. So you check these four levels to see what needs to be done. Is the breath energy flowing freely? Are the feelings flowing freely? Are the feelings enticing? Are they pleasant? Are they refreshing? Is the mind gathered around? What other qualities need to be used to protect you from the qualities that are going to try to pull you away? Those are the four things to look at. When John Lee gives you those seven steps in the breath meditation, it’s not like he’s teaching a mechanical process. He’s giving you tools. With any tool, you find that the way you use it is going to vary from day to day. The breath changes, the body changes, the state of your mind changes. It’s like a carpenter’s set of tools. The tools the carpenter uses from one day to the next will depend on what the job is that particular day. Sometimes the jobs are similar, sometimes they’ll vary. You’re working on a table. You work on one part of the table today and another aspect of the table tomorrow. You’ve got the tools, and you’ve got to figure out, “Here’s the job that needs to be done. What’s the tool that’s appropriate?” This takes time. But you have to remember the mind is not a factory. It’s not an assembly line where you just do the same thing over and over and over again, day after day after day, because the quality of the mind will change. It’s a lot more variable and a lot more sensitive. It’s a lot more sensitive than the range of tables and chairs and cabinets that a carpenter could be working on. So you exercise the various tools, and then you get a better and better sense of which tool is needed when, when you want to focus on the length of the breath, when you want to focus on the breath moving the different parts of the body. All of this comes with practice. And developing that quality of circumspection is key. You’re looking both at what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. You’re looking at the object that you’re focusing on and the way you focus, and the various layers that surround it. If this seems too complex, well, do what you can to focus in on the breath. Get that established, and you’ll begin to see these other layers right there. But it’s your sensitivity, your circumspection, and the intentness with which you work that really focus on what you’re doing. Those are the qualities that will bring everything together and turn the meditation into a skill.

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