The Mind on a Leash

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We’re training the mind. It’s like being an athlete in training. There are certain kinds of things you have to avoid, and special exercises you have to do so that you can maximize the benefits of the training. Here at the monastery we have a lot of time for sitting meditation and walking meditation. When you leave the monastery, you may not have so much time for that. But you still have a twenty-four hour day. The days here are not longer than the days out there. It’s just that the days out there have a lot of other things packed into them. But just because you’re doing something else doesn’t mean you can’t be training the mind at the same time. We tend to have a very narrow idea that training the mind is sitting and doing concentration practice or insight practice. That’s part of the training, of course, but there’s a lot more. In the same way that when you’re sitting here you basically got the mind leashed to the breath, when you get up and walk around you still have to have it leashed to the breath as well. It may not be with the same amount of concentration and the same amount of focus. You may not be even conscious of whether the breath is going in or going out, but you can be conscious of the quality of your breath energy in your body. You want to be sensitive to that. How does the breath energy feel in the chest or in the stomach? Any place in the body that’s especially sensitive, try to keep your awareness there. And as soon as something comes up in the mind, you’ll notice that that part tenses up. There’s a catch in the breath. There’s a squeezing of the breath right there. If you’re sensitive enough to it, as soon as you realize it’s there, try to relax it. Don’t be carrying around a lot of the tension. And then keep watch. Of course, you’ll be doing other things at the same time, but it is possible to be with your breath at least to that extent. Because after all, when you’re doing work, your mind thinks about all kinds of things in addition to the work. So rather than think about all those other random things, think about the breath energy right here. And then using the breath energy as a post, you can practice sense restraint. This is a part of the practice that tends to be overlooked, but it’s really important because you’re sitting here meditating and trying to clean out the mind. It doesn’t help that when you leave the meditation, you just go out and gobble down all the things that are going to get it dirty again. You’ve got to be careful about how you look, what you look at. But in particular, you have to be careful about why you’re looking. When you look at something, what are you looking for? If it’s in line with your work, that’s one thing, but there are a lot of things that you’re looking for, and you’re looking for them because lust is pointing you out, or anger is pointing you out. All too often we think that lust gets inside it or anger gets inside it because of something that someone else has done outside. And our poor, passive little mind here is suddenly afflicted by it. But all too often it’s the case that the mind is going out looking for trouble. You want to find something that you can feel lustful for. You want to find something you can feel angry about, something you feel greed for. The mind is really proactive, and so you have to be careful when you’re looking. Who’s doing the looking? As Ajahn Lee once said, “Who’s doing the looking? Is it you, or is it some hungry ghost in your mind, some common animal?” What’s doing the looking? And if you notice that you’re looking under the influence of lust, come back to the breath. You use the breath as a post here for several reasons. One is that you can take it as a kind of a standard of measurement to know when the movement’s happening. If you don’t have something, it’s really still. You can’t really be sure about the movements around you. It’s like sitting in a train station. You’re in one train and there’s another train next to you, and you see that in relationship to your train, the other train is moving. But you’re not really sure. Is your train moving, or is the other one? Because there’s nothing on the ground, fixed to the ground, that you can tell for sure. Unless you happen to pass a post, in which case you know, “Okay, we’re moving. The other train is not.” That’s one of the reasons why you stay with the breath. So you have a standard of measurement to know when the mind has moved. Another good reason is because when you can get the breath comfortable, then you don’t feel so hungry to go out looking for scraps outside. As you keep on saying no to your lust or no to your anger, after a while it starts getting felt hemmed in, burdened, oppressed, for lack of a sense of pleasure. But if you can create a sense of pleasure inside, you don’t feel so driven to go look outside. So try to have this sense of the body as you go through the day, at ease, relaxed to whatever extent you can be aware of the breath energy. And be very careful about what you look at, what you listen to, and especially what you think about. One of the senses you have to restrain as you go through the day is to ask yourself, “What are you carrying around that you don’t need to carry around?” Something someone said this morning, something you did this afternoon, why do you have to carry it around? And again, it’s an issue of your thoughts being driven by greed or aversion or delusion or fear or any of the other unskillful. Tendencies that keep pushing you, pushing you in a particular direction. You find yourself entangled in an unskillful thought. Ask yourself, “What am I doing this for? What am I getting out of this?” Because usually there’s a thought someplace in the mind that you’re gaining something from feeding on a particular kind of thought or going over it again and again and again. But what are you gaining? Usually it’s very little, if not nothing. On top of the fact that you’re causing a lot of unnecessary stress. So the skills we learn dealing with the breath to keep the mind here in the present moment, they’re not only for times when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. They’re for 24/7. The need to keep the mind under control is always there as well. But again, it’s learning how to make the control something that’s not oppressive. If you find yourself looking at something that’s exciting lust, you can either turn away or try to look at it in a different way. This is why we have the reflection on thirty-two parts of the body. Try looking at it in another way that’s not so productive of anger. Or just don’t listen to it, don’t look at it, whatever. Because you’re trying to heal the mind. You’re trying to strengthen the mind. And just as athletes have to avoid certain foods and things like cigarettes or alcohol or whatever while they’re training, there are lots of things you have to avoid while you’re training the mind as well. Things that serve only to create more problems and to revive the unskillful mental states that you’ve been trying to get rid of. So don’t think of it that you have time to practice and then there’s the rest of the day. The whole day is time to practice. Jon Fung’s comment is useful to keep in mind. But if we make our practice timeless, in other words, whatever the activity, there is something to be done to train the mind. Even if you’re engaged in your work, issues that arise in the family, keep watch on your mind, keep watch on your senses. And maintain this sense of a center, where you have a sense of feeling safe and nourished, a sense of stability in the midst of all the changes around you. At the very least, you’re going to suffer a lot less. And you may find that ideas occur to you, insights come to you, that wouldn’t have come if you weren’t trying to stay centered. You learn a lot about them. You learn movements of the mind as you try to stay unmoved by things. So this way, even though you don’t have a lot of time to sit and meditate or do walking meditation, you still have time to practice. As the Jons always said, if you’ve got time to breathe, you’ve got time to practice. If you have time to look and listen, you’ve got time to practice. If you’ve got time to think, you’ve got time to practice. See that the opportunities for practice are all around you, that you can make your practice timeless. That’s how it builds up momentum. That’s the purpose of the training.

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