Maintaining Focus

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Focusing on the breath is not all that hard. The hard part is in staying focused. Just like sitting on a bike is not all that hard when you’re a little kid. But you find that riding the bike, maintaining a sense of balance, requires that you fall down many times before you get it right. And it’s the same with the breath. You find that you can slip off very easily and you can come back. You can make a mistake of either being too lackadaisical about coming back or being too hard on yourself for having slipped off. And it takes a while to perfect that balanced attitude that’s alert but cheerful and resilient. In other words, you slip off. It’s a big deal, but it’s not a big deal. It’s normal. Then you have to get used to the fact that the mind is going to slip off and whatever state of concentration you had can very easily unravel. Then you want to balance that with the realization that if you get too relaxed about the whole thing, nothing ever develops. Several years back I was teaching a meditation retreat in France, making the point that you really had to be on top of the breath. And as soon as the mind slipped off, as soon as you realized that it slipped off, bring it back. And then reward yourself with some good breathing. There’s one woman there who had been taught the type of meditation where you just kind of watch your mind wander around. And if it’s with the breath, that’s okay. And if it’s not with the breath, that’s okay. And at the end of the retreat, she was standing there for ten years. She’d been wasting her time. Because that is a waste of time. You really are here to work on a skill, and the skill requires that you have the right attitude to master the skill. They’ve done research on people who are really, really good at physical skills, and they found that on the one hand, they have to have a very strong sense of the advantages that come from mastering the skill, and on the other hand, a strong sense of the dangers that come from not mastering it. So you have to find the right balance. You’re alert, you’re heatful, but you have to be cheerful at the same time. Notice those instructions the Buddha gives on dealing with the mind in meditation. Once you’re aware of the state of the mind, you’ll notice either that you have to gladden it—in other words, give it more energy, keep it happy—or you have to steady it. In other words, do what you can to make it firmly here. And then release it. Release it from any attitudes that are weighing it down, anything that’s getting in the way of maintaining that right balance. So those are the three things you’ve got to keep in mind. Make sure the mind is glad, but at the same time that it’s steady and that it’s not burdening itself. So that’s maintaining the balance while you’re here. And as you work with the breath, that you have your own ways of gladdening the mind or steadying it or releasing it. Sometimes thinking about death helps to steady the mind. You could die at any moment. Where do you want your mind to be at the moment of death? You want it to be right here. So try to keep it right here, realizing that if you start wandering off, that could be the moment when some little blood clot gets into your heart and it stops. So sometimes thinking about death helps to steady the mind. As for gladdening, well, whatever makes you happy about the fact that you’re meditating. You’re part of a long lineage of people. It goes back to the Buddha. You read about the monks and the nuns in the time of the Buddha and all the difficulties they had in getting their minds to settle down. But they were able to do it. And you realize there were people from all walks of life, all different ages. And even though on the outside their lives may not have looked all that special, there was something special about them inside. You see the same thing with the dead children. In Thailand, many of them came from very poor peasant families. If you looked at them from the outside, they’d be the least likely people to be pioneers in reviving the practice. And yet they were the ones who did it. In other words, regardless of where you are in life, the fact that this practice can help you pull yourself up by the bootstraps, and you’re doing it right here. Think about that, that gladdening. As for releasing the mind, do you find that there are any cares or concerns that would pull you away? Try to see them in perspective. This is one of the reasons why we have that reflection on the body. It’s not just to overcome lust, but all our concerns about the body. Whether eating only one meal a day is going to be bad for the body or it’s going to be bad for the body. Staying up too late at night meditating would be bad for the body. Say, “That’s not the issue. The body’s going to die anyhow.” You want to get some good use out of it before you go. This doesn’t mean that you’re running into the ground as quickly as possible, but it does mean that you’re willing to push things more than you otherwise might be willing to push. In the meantime, you realize that working on the breath is good for the body. It’s good for your health. So breath energy spreads around through the blood vessels and through the nerves. It improves your circulation. Organs in the body that ordinarily might be getting deprived of oxygen and deprived of nourishment are now given their fair share. You can tend to the ailments of the body with the breath. So there are lots of ways you can gladden yourself, steady the mind, release the mind, and keep yourself in the right mood to stay right here and to be alert to when the mind is going to slip off and to be happy that you’re coming back. All those theajans many times point out that it’s not the case that the mind actually goes off someplace. It’s simply that it switches its frame of reference right here. All you have to do is switch it back and you’re right here. You don’t have to pull the mind in. It’s simply a matter of dropping whatever that distracting thought was and you’re right back. So those are some of the things we do as we meditate in order to maintain our concentration. And as you go through the day, there are other things that are helpful. One is just simply trying to stay with the breath and seeing what pulls you off. That’s where a lot of the insight comes. John Sowood often noted that for him, insight came most readily while he was doing walking meditation. In fact, there’s a Dhamma talk where he talks about his final awakening. It was right here in the monastery, walking down the path to his hut. It’s when you’re walking around and trying to maintain this that you see the movements of the mind as they slip off. And you see where they go and what’s causing them to go. This is, again, another reason why we do the contemplation of the body. Because the mind does slip off to bodies an awful lot. You think about, “Well, what’s there? What’s there to get really worked up about? What’s there that’s really desirable?” You think about it long enough and you realize there’s nothing much in your body or anybody else’s. And then there’s restraint of the senses in general. It’s so easy to let your mind wander around in the course of the day and then say, “Okay, now that I’m meditating, I’ll get serious about keeping it in place.” But the habits you pick up as you wander around, those are going to stick with you and you’re going to have to fight them while you’re sitting here. So the best thing is to keep the mind on a leash. There’s that image in the Canon of the six different animals, each animal on a leash and the ends of the leash. The leashes tie together. If they’re not tied to a post, one of the animals will prove to be stronger than the others and will drag them in whichever direction it wants to go. You need a firm post. And guess what the post is? Mindfulness of the body. Mindfulness of the body can be many things. It can be this contemplation of the body in terms of its thirty-two parts, which, if you find that your interest is going off in that direction, it’s right here. To remind you, what is there out there? Everybody’s body is literally full of excrement, full of blood and pus, all those liquids in the body that we’d have to clean up if anybody broke open here. And they come oozing out the pores all the time. Anyhow, that’s one way mindfulness of the body is a good post for all those leashes to be tied to. Mindfulness of the breath. If you’re staying here with the breath, you have a point of reference. So if your mind goes flashing out to something, well, you’ve got at least part of your awareness right here. And you can see the part of the mind that’s going out and you can see the part of the mind that’s staying here. And you realize you don’t have to go out with that. You don’t have to change your frame of reference. You’ve got a better place to stay right here where you can have a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of clarity. Because you begin to notice that when the mind goes into its different thoughts, there’s a dulling of your awareness. And you ask yourself, “Why would you put up with that? Isn’t clarity better? Isn’t that the state that the mind actually prefers?” So in this way, you’ve got the breath as your post as you go through the day. And all your animals end up sitting or lying down next to the post. That way, when the time comes to sit down to form a meditation, everybody’s right here. So these are some of the things to keep in mind when you realize that the important part of the meditation is in the maintaining. Because as you maintain your center, you get to see things you wouldn’t see otherwise. The movements of the mind are invisible to you because you’re moving as well. As in that image from Ajaan Lee, if you’re on the train, the train is always moving. You look out the window and everything is moving. You have no idea what’s moving and what’s not. It’s only when the train stops or you get off the train and you stand still, that’s when you see that the mountains that look to be moving are not moving. The houses that seem to be moving are not moving. But you can see the things that are moving much more clearly. So the maintaining is the important part of the meditation. Because once you maintain it, then you can use it. I was talking recently to someone who had a flash of a very impressive mental state. He dropped all perceptions of things outside, and there just seemed to be a sense of pure awareness. It lasted for a little bit, but because his powers of concentration were strong, it dissipated pretty quickly. He consulted with some teachers and they intimated that it was probably stream-entry, but he was sharp enough to realize that he still had a very strong sense of self in the midst of that, so it couldn’t have been that. It was probably one of those flashes of a formless state. They happen. They do happen randomly. But the fact that they happen randomly doesn’t really mean anything. You’ve got to learn how to master how you get in, how you get out, how you can stay there. That’s when you can actually get some use out of these things. The only way to do that is to work first on your precepts, work on your concentration, work with the breath, work with cruder states, but develop a consistency of mindfulness and a consistency of alertness. Then as it gets more and more refined and you hit these other levels, you’ll be able to stay there. Once you can stay there, then you can do things with these states. So try to develop the right balance in your meditation so that you can maintain balance steadily. And think about how you go through your life, where you let your mind wander in the course of the day, to make sure that you’re creating the right environment. Because the environment is not so much what is there outside, but it’s what you create through your acts of attention and intention as you go through the day. So ask yourself, what environment are you creating out of the raw material that’s being offered you? And it’s right there that you really can make a big difference.

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