Training the Mind

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Close your eyes. Sit up straight. Place your hands in your lap, right hand on top of the left. Watch your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing right now. And notice if it’s comfortable. If it doesn’t feel comfortable to breathe long, you can change the rhythm of the breathing. You can breathe slowly, fast, deep or shallow, heavy, light, long, short—any combination of those types of breathing. See what feels really good for the body. If the body seems to be tired, breathe in a way that gives it more energy. If it seems to be tense, try to breathe in a way that’s more relaxed. Long in and short out is energizing. Short in and long out is relaxing and calming. Or you can simply pose the question in your mind each time you breathe in, “What kind of breathing would feel good now? What breath would feel good?” See how the body responds. In the beginning, you don’t want to push things too much because there’s a tendency to push them in ways that are not really helpful. So just tend to the breath. Look after it the same way you’d look after a child. Let the child have its freedom. You simply keep an eye on it, make sure it doesn’t get into trouble. And if your attention wanders off, just drop whatever it is you’ve been thinking and come right back to the breath. Because the mind needs to be trained. If you just let it follow its thoughts wherever they go, you can get yourself into trouble. It can start off wandering in something that looks interesting and pleasant and end up somewhere else entirely. One of the first skills you need in learning how to train the mind is to learn how to drop your thoughts and just come back to the present moment, come back to the breath. Because it’s not that you don’t want the mind ever to think ever again, but you do want to have a skill. When you see your thinking is taking you in ways that are either going to make you act in an unskillful way or speak in an unskillful way or think in ways that create all kinds of unnecessary suffering for yourself or other people, you know how to drop it. There’s no need to tie up the loose ends. You just drop the thought, mid-thought, and come back to the breath. The purpose of making the breath comfortable is twofold. One, it feels really good to stay here and the mind will be more and more inclined to want to stay here. And as a side benefit, it’s good for the body. After all, this is the energy of life. This is the energy that keeps the body going, keeps the mind with the body. Without this energy flowing in and out of the body, you wouldn’t be here. The body would be dead. You’d be off someplace else. So pay attention to this energy. And as you stay with the breath, you learn an important skill. It’s not just learning how to drop your thoughts, but you develop good qualities of mind for keeping watch over what’s going on. Mindfulness, the ability to remember to stay here, is something you can apply to anything, any task you’ve got to do. You’ve got certain things you want to keep in mind, you don’t want to forget. All too often we know what’s right and we know what’s wrong. And yet somehow we get involved in one responsibility or another and we find ourselves forgetting. So you want to develop the mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. So you work with this task. Keep the breath in mind. And then you can transfer that ability to other things. There’s the quality of alertness, watching what’s going on. If you’re with the breath, you want to watch very carefully to see if it’s comfortable or not. If you’ve dropped the breath, you want to notice the fact that you’ve dropped the breath. And then there’s the quality of ardency. You put some energy into this to do it well. In other words, you notice if the breath isn’t comfortable, you can change. If it is comfortable, you want to learn how to maintain that. If the mind is wandered off, you can change. If you want to notice that it’s wandered off, you want to be able to drop whatever it is that it’s been following and come right back. You really want to put your heart into this right now. Because that’s a good quality to have. Any task you take up in the world needs to have a sense of really sincerely doing it and trying to do it well, bringing energy to the task. And if you do it right, you find that you get more energy out of it. Because, again, there are times we know what’s right and we know what’s wrong. We know what’s going to be harmful and what’s not going to be harmful. And we can’t even remember that. But there are times we don’t have the energy to do what’s right or to resist what’s wrong. So this is another important skill to develop. The ability to stay still with the breath right here and gather up the energy of the mind. The Buddha compares a concentrated mind to food. He has the image of your mind being like a fortress at the edge of a frontier. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper. Make sure that none of the enemy can sneak in through the gate. And your effort and your urgency, those are like the soldiers in the fortress. Now the mindfulness and your effort need food. And the mind in concentration is the food. Because when you stay with the breath, you’re very careful to notice what’s working and what’s not, what feels good and what doesn’t feel good. There’s a sense of energy that the Buddha calls a rapture, a refreshment. There’s a pleasure that comes. These are food for the mind, and they’re good food, too. The mind has a tendency to feed on all kinds of things. You feed on sight, smell, taste, tactile sensations. Those are like snacks. They can get rid of a little bit of the mind’s hunger, but they don’t give you any lasting nourishment. The qualities you develop from within, those are the real food for the mind. So you examine the breath, evaluate what’s going on, and then you adjust it. This is how you begin to settle down. You’re trying to get the breath and the mind so that they’re happy to be together. This gives nourishment to the mind. When the mind is nourished, then as you deal with the affairs of the day and you see that something should be done and you know it’s going to take effort, you realize you’ve got the strength. Or if there’s something you feel tempted to do that you know is not right, you’ve got the strength to resist that. So the skills of meditation are not just here for stress reduction in the present moment, but meditation is more like an exercise that strengthens the good qualities of the mind that you can then use in all your activities. Because this is part of a larger training. We’re not only here to get the mind still, we’re also going to be able to look at our actions as we go through the day. As that chant we had just now said, we’re subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. What do we have that’s ours, that we can depend on? It’s our actions and the results of our actions. To act skillfully, you need a well-trained mind. And to train the mind, you need motivation. This is why we have the chants in the evening before the meditation. We think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, because they’re good examples. The Buddha set an example of wisdom, purity, compassion, and liberation in his life. The Sangha are his awakened disciples, the people who practice his teachings and reach the end of suffering. They’re good examples, too. As for the Dhamma, that sort of lays out the roadmap. And this is how they did it. The Buddha, for example, developed wisdom by asking himself what happiness is really worth pursuing. And he realized that he wanted something that wouldn’t change. And that was going to require a lot of deep digging down into the mind. So he carefully looked at what he was doing. And anything that was harmful to himself or others, he would abandon it. That’s his purity. He followed that principle not only in his actions, but also in his words. And then, finally, looking into his mind, what in the mind was causing the least little bit of disturbance, he tried to figure out where that disturbance would be unnecessary, how he could abandon it. That’s how he found something of real value inside the mind, something that wasn’t dependent on conditions. Having found it, he taught the way. That’s his compassion. He set up the monastic orders as ways of maintaining this teaching that lasted now for 2,600 years. So that’s the example we’re taking. This is what a human being can do. Maybe we’re not a perfect human being, but we can at least act with wisdom, purity, and compassion in our pursuit of happiness, too. Some people look down on the pursuit of happiness, saying that it’s a lowly thing. You shouldn’t be just looking for pleasure. Well, the Buddha said you’ve got to take this seriously. What kind of happiness do you want? What’s really worth the effort? Because that’s how we act anyhow. Everything we do, say, or think is because we’ve figured out that whatever effort’s involved is going to be worth it. So he pursued that principle. It’s a very basic one. It’s just something that’s so worth the effort that it would reward you with a happiness that doesn’t change. And that’s what he found. And that’s the part of his example that everybody can follow. As for the example of the Sangha, they were the ones who were willing to take the Buddhist teachings and straighten out their minds in line with the teachings. There’s always a strong temptation when you read the Buddhist teachings or the Buddhist teachings come into a new country to try to change them to fit in with the beliefs and customs of that country. But there are certain principles that lie beyond customs and lie beyond beliefs. And if you’re willing to submit yourself to them, in other words, take your actions seriously, take your happiness seriously, you’ll find that the teachings really do give results. The practice really does give the results. So when we have the chance for the Buddha and the Dhamma of the Sangha, that’s to keep this in mind. To remind ourselves of what the example is that we’re trying to follow. And the examples are there to show us what human beings can do. And it starts right here, learning how to train the mind. One of the points of the training is that you can learn how to think any thought that is worth thinking and learn how to let go of any thought that’s not worth thinking. If you’ve ever really looked carefully at your mind, you can realize that that’s an important skill. Because all too often we find ourselves thinking things that just put the mind in worse and worse condition. You look at other people’s thinking and you realize, boy, those thoughts can drive people crazy. People get into a lot of trouble. They have a mind of thinking that’s really harmful for themselves or for other people. When you look at all the harm that comes from the way people think, you can see that just this simple skill—learning how to think what’s worth thinking and learning how to let go of any thoughts that are not worth thinking—is an important principle right there. So stay with the breath. This is putting the mind in a good position. It’s a good position where it can develop that ability. It’s a good place to stay so that you don’t feel hungry for thoughts. Don’t go gobbling down any thoughts that end up being poisonous. Because the concentration itself is a kind of food, the sense of ease, well-being, that can come when you really look carefully at the breath and allow the breath to nourish the body. So feed your mind well. It’s like any kind of training. What you eat is an important part of the training. So here we’re trying to feed on the pleasure that’s always accessible, always harmless. It’s an observant of the breath and the body. So the mind can always feed on pleasure and refreshment to keep itself strong for the training.

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