Reading Your Mind

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When you focus on the breath, you need to keep an eye on your mind. After all, it is the mind that’s being focused, or it’s trying to focus. The fact that sometimes it doesn’t settle down very easily, that’s why you have to keep an eye on it and learn how to read it. If the mind’s not willing to settle down, what can you do? You have to watch it for a bit to see exactly what the problem is. This is a quality called yoniso nasikara, which means appropriate attention. In other words, looking at your mind from the right point of view, from the right perspective, a perspective that helps you to figure out where the problems are and what you can do about them. Inappropriate attention is when you start going into the thoughts and taking them on, concerned about what they say, whether they’re true or not true, whether they’re important or not important. From the point of view of appropriate attention right now, any thoughts not related to the breath or the state of the mind are inappropriate. You don’t want to get involved. But you can watch them as a process. They’re caused by certain things and they lead to certain things in the mind. So you want to figure out which are the good causes and which are the bad ones. Working with the breath is one way of dealing with a lot of problems in the mind, because a lot of the unskillful qualities of the mind are based on a sense of dis-ease in the present moment. You’re not content to be here, and you’ve got lots of good reasons for why you don’t want to be content to be here. There are pains here and discomforts there. Just a general sense of not feeling at ease here. So working with the breath helps work through a lot of those issues right there. But sometimes you find that either working with the breath is not enough, or it’s really hard even to work with the breath because there are so many other things going on in the mind. So the Buddha provides you with two very useful lists. One is the list of the hindrances, and the other is the list of the seven factors for awakening to help you interpret what’s going on and also to give you some ideas of what you might do about it. In both cases, again, appropriate attention is what’s going to be helpful. Appropriate attention is what helps get you past the hindrances and helps you to develop the factors for awakening. The hindrances are sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. The first hindrance has to do with desire, the second one has to do with anger, and the last three are variations of delusion. Delusion with too little energy, delusion with too much energy, and just plain old not knowing. There are some delusions where you think you know, but you don’t really know. But uncertainty is one where you know that you don’t know. These are things that get in the way of your concentration. So you have to learn how to undercut them. As for the seven factors for awakening, there’s mindfulness, analysis of qualities—which is very similar to appropriate attention—persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. Those are the qualities that you want to encourage, although you have to be careful with those. As appropriate attention will point out to you, even though these qualities are skillful, one set or one group of them may be appropriate for times when you’re sleepy or drowsy. Analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture are useful then, and other times when your energy level is too high. That’s when you want to calm things down with calm, concentration, and equanimity. So those are the things to look for when you’re trying to get the mind concentrated. If you see sensual desire coming in, know that it’s a hindrance. The problem is that when things like this come in, you’re not interested in labeling them as hindrances or dealing with them in that direction. You’re more likely to see that. You start thinking about something that’s beautiful and attractive, and you say, “Well, that really is beautiful and attractive, and I’d like to think about it for a while.” Or think about somebody who’s been really nasty, and you can come up with all sorts of reasons why you should get really upset about them. So that’s mainly the first step, and the most important step in dealing with the hindrances is stepping back from them and recognizing that regardless of how true they may be or how true the thoughts are, they give rise to them. They’re not what you want right now. This is not the time and place for those things. And the Buddha gives you lots of techniques for dealing with unskillful thoughts like this. You either just notice that this is unskillful and then you can drop and go back to something skillful. That’s when things don’t have too much Velcro. But other times when the thoughts really do have a lot of Velcro and you have to figure out some way to shave off all those little hooks, that’s when you consciously have to think about the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking. The Buddha says to develop a sense of disgust around it, in the same way that if somebody took a carcass of a dog and put it around your neck. We don’t usually think of our thoughts as dog carcasses or snake carcasses. But if you step back from a lot of them, you realize that’s pretty much what they are. So you look at what would happen if you thought that thought of sensual desire for twenty-four hours, where would it lead you? Or that thought of ill will for twenty-four hours, where would it lead you? Or you might look at your thoughts as a movie director might look at a really badly played scene. Something would end up on the cutting room floor. Or you can ask yourself that question, “If this were a movie, would you pay to watch it?” Anything that makes you realize that you really don’t want to be involved with that thinking, that’s one way of dealing with it. Another way is to know that the thinking is there, but you don’t have to get involved. It’s like the sound of the crickets in the background. They’re there, but you don’t have to be focusing on the sound of crickets right now. They don’t destroy your breath. The breath is right here for you to watch coming in and going out. Have that same attitude to our thoughts that come in and out of the mind. They’re no more interesting than cricket sounds. A fourth way of dealing with thoughts is to look at them as a way to consciously relax the body. You’ll notice as you get more sensitive to the breath that when a thought develops, there’s going to be a little bit of tension in the body as kind of a signal or mark for yourself to keep that thought in mind. And if you can locate where in the body that is, breathe right through it. That undercuts the thought. The fifth method when all others fail is just to grit your teeth, press your tongue against the tip of your mouth, and just keep telling yourself, “I will not think that thought.” You might think butto, butto, butto instead. Something, anything, but. But just force the thought out. That’s a method of last resort. It uses more force than discernment, but it’s a useful method sometimes. If you think of all these methods as different tools, you want to make sure your toolbox has a complete set. So if you notice any of the hindrances that are coming in, these are some useful ways of dealing with them. You can also bring in the factors for awakening. Some people think the factors for awakening are a description of the awakened mind state, and you wonder, “Well, how am I going to bring that into my meditation?” That’s not the case at all. These are qualities you develop in the direction of awakening. For example, when there’s a lot of uncertainty in your life, in your mind, the Buddha says you can counteract it with analysis of qualities. In other words, look very carefully at what’s skillful and what’s unskillful in your mind. If you can’t jump to any conclusions or come to any conclusions right away, well, just watch and keep that question posed in your mind. How would you recognize something skillful? How would you recognize something unskillful? Well, you recognize it by where it comes from and where it’s going. As for sloth and torpor, you can find some reserves of energy, either in the mind or in the body. They’re there. Look for them. The Buddha says you look for them first. If you can’t find any at all, maybe you really do need to sleep. But for a lot of times, the sloth and torpor in the mind has nothing to do with whether you really need to sleep or not. It’s simply that things are going to be coming up in the mind, and part of the mind senses this. It doesn’t want to look at them, and so it tries to shut things down. So you’ve got to fight that tendency. Ask yourself where in the body there’s some extra energy. Where in your mind can you think in a way that gives you more energy? You’ve probably experienced this many times. You’ve been doing walking meditation and you seem like you’re going to fall over. You say, “Well, just five more minutes.” Then you do five more minutes, and then you find that you’re okay again. And you can go on for a long, long time after that. So just because there’s a cloud coming over the mind doesn’t mean that it’s going to be a cloudy day. There are some clouds that come passing through, and then they pass on. So you have to gather your strength together. At the very least, you can sit through the drowsy period and come out on the other end. The factors awaiting, things like calm and concentration, are useful for counteracting restlessness and anxiety. So it’s important to keep these lists in mind, to think about what you might bring to bear. To undercut those unskillful qualities or the hindrances and get the mind more on track. And those lists of dhammas, they’re not just there to memorize. They’re there to memorize so that you can apply them to what’s going on. You can use them to read your mind. A rosetta stone helps you interpret what’s going on. But it’s appropriate attention that’s going to help sort all these things out. It works together with mindfulness. In other words, you keep these categories in mind. And you keep in mind the basic desire, why you’re here. You want to develop skillful qualities in the mind. And then you use the various lists to apply them. See, what’s the problem here? Is it settling down? Why not? If it is settled down, what do you want to maintain? Which of the skillful qualities is skillful for right now? That’s what you’re going to learn from your own experience, when you need some tranquility, when you need to put a little more effort in. So don’t look down on memorization, or don’t look down on the idea that you’re going to study something. That’s an important part of the practice. When you’re focused here on the breath, when things are going well, you don’t need to keep these things in mind. After all, the getting-away behavior is staying with the breath. When things are beginning to wobble, it’s useful to have your tools near at hand. Unfortunately, the toolbox here doesn’t have to weigh you down. It’s just there someplace in the mind. But before you sit down to meditate, remind yourself, “What are your tools?” So as soon as you begin to get a sense that you need one of the tools, they’ll be right there. 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