Make Your Mind Reliable

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It’s hard to find anything reliable in the world. You read the news enough and you quickly realize that there’s somebody out there that they can pay to write anything. No matter how outrageous the story may be or outrageous the point of view, you can find people that will advance it. Especially now with the internet, everybody’s an expert. So you begin to realize the only way you’re going to find anything reliable in life is if you make your own mind reliable. If you tell it to stay in one place, will it stay there? That’s the first test. And this is one of the reasons why we try to train the mind in concentration. Because when you first come to the Buddha’s teachings, of course, you have no proof that they’re true. But what he does is he teaches you how to make your mind reliable so you can sort out the truth in a way that you can trust. If your mind can stay concentrated, if you can see ways in which you’re creating unnecessary stress for yourself, you can learn how to stop those ways. Then the mind becomes reliable. Otherwise, it just gets pushed around by its own greed, aversion, and delusion, and easily gets pushed around by other people who want to take advantage of its greed, aversion, and delusion, and you don’t know which way is up. So these are the qualities you try to tame. Bring the mind right now to the breath. Where do you feel the breathing? When we talk about breath here, we’re talking about the energy flow in the body, the energy that allows the air to come into the lungs when you breathe in and allows it to go out when you breathe out. Where do you feel that energy? Focus on the area where it’s most prominent, where it’s clearest. Make up your mind you’re going to stay there. It requires a strategy. The mind doesn’t normally stay with the breath. It quickly goes out to other things. But if you can make the breath really comfortable, and realize that this is good for your health, it’s good for the health of the body, the health of the mind, that gives you some motivation to stay here. And fortunately, the breath is one of the processes of the body that you can exert some control over. You can make it long, short, heavy, light, fast, slow. So experiment. Take advantage of that ability to see if you can make the breath interesting and pleasant right now. And if the mind wanders off, bring it right back. This is how you train it to be reliable. You give it a job to do and you stick with the job. That means you have to watch over it. The part that watches over is alertness. It notices what the mind is doing, it notices what the breath is doing, it notices that they’re staying together if they’re beginning to slip apart. You remember to bring them back. This is what mindfulness does. It’s the remembering. It remembers the task that you’ve assigned to the mind so you don’t suddenly forget and run off into a shopping list someplace or make plans for your next vacation. Or complain to yourself about what your boss said, what your teacher said, what your people in your family said. You can sit here and fill the hour with all kinds of random garbage. But you want to remember you’re here for a purpose. You’re here to get the mind reliable. And you try to do it well. The Buddha calls that quality ardency, that you’re really earnest in what you’re doing. You’re not grim, but you’re serious in the sense of being sincere. You really want to do this well. So anything you notice about how the mind slips off the breath, how the breath gets uncomfortable, how you lose focus, try to notice those things and see if there are ways that you can counteract them. This is going to require some of your own ingenuity. And John Lee makes a comparison with a teacher teaching you how to weave a basket. The teacher can tell you, “This is how things are woven,” and give you some pointers. But the teacher can’t be there all the time to correct every little problem. You’ve got to learn how to recognize the problems as they come up and figure out a way around them. This way, the meditation becomes your own. You’re not just doing somebody else’s method, you’re training your mind for your own purpose, based on your own powers of observation. This is what makes the meditation something that can slip easily into your life. If it’s just an outside thing, somebody in Thailand dreamed up, and now you’re trying to force the mind to do it without a sense of how to adjust it to your needs, it becomes foreign and alien and disagreeable, and you’re going to drop it pretty quickly. But you realize this is how you relate to your body. It’s an issue of how you relate to your body, it’s an issue of how you relate to things coming up in your own mind, so that you can get some control over them. So you can take advantage of the fact that you’ve got a body here, you’ve got a mind, and they can do really good things if you train them well. We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. But what that means is we try to bring their qualities into our own minds, make them alive in our own minds. It’s something we can depend on. When you develop your concentration, you see things a lot more clearly. And if you see that something has to be done, then whether you ordinarily like to do it or not, when the mind is well-concentrated, it has the strength to do it. Because as you get the mind settled in like this, you find that you’re feeding it, giving it energy. And it’s up to you to use that energy well. So try to be alert, try to be mindful, try to be ardent in what you’re doing. It’s the use of the qualities that make you reliable. What you’re doing is you’re showing compassion to yourself. You’re exercising your discernment, realizing that if you’re going to find anything true in life, the first thing that has to be made true is your own mind. Sometimes you hear about Buddhist wisdom being very exotic and paradoxical. It’s very hard to understand, but it comes down to some basic principles. It comes down to the principle that your actions make a difference, so you want to do them well. That’s where wisdom begins. That’s where your discernment begins. And then you try your best to stick with that principle. You don’t want to cause any harm to anybody else. You don’t want to cause any harm to yourself. And the benefits for others and the benefits for yourself have to start here with the mind. When you learn that you can rely more on your mind, you feel less inclined to have to run around and rely on people. When you don’t have to depend on them, then you don’t start pinning them down. With your own imagination about who you can trust, who you can depend on, it becomes less an issue because you find that you can depend on yourself. That way you’re not painting different faces on other people. You’re seeing them for what they are, rather than what you want them to be. That way, when you can rely on yourself, you can also rely on what you see out there in the world. Now, it may not be what other people tell you. In fact, in a lot of cases, it won’t be. But as you get the mind more trustworthy like this, you can depend on your own powers of perception. That way you do less damage to the world, and the world does a lot less damage to you. Right here. You’ve got to be true if you’re going to find the truth. You’ve got to be reliable in order to find something that you can rely on. These qualities start from the mind. So train the mind so that it has those qualities. That’s when you’re safe all around.

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