Drawing a Line (outdoors)

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Okay, let’s sit and meditate. There’s a breeze outside, it’s a little warm. What you want to focus on is the breeze inside the body. In other words, the breath energy flowing in, flowing out as you breathe. This is one of the basic skills of meditation. You could be spending your time thinking about how hot it is outside today, and that just weighs the mind down. And the heat doesn’t do all that much, especially when you’re sitting here quietly under the trees. If you had to work out in the sun and it required a lot of physical strength, then you’d be having problems. But here you’re just sitting quietly and the fact that the body is warm from the outside, well, that’s just some of the things that warmth does. That’s what the world does. But you have the choice as to whether you want to suffer over it or not. So you want to be able to make that distinction. What the world is doing and what you’re doing right now, you want to make a clear distinction. So right now you focus on the breath. Each time you breathe in, try to be aware of where you feel the breath. And do your best not to wander off. When you give the mind work to do like this, then it doesn’t have time to worry about the heat. And you’re not exacerbating the heat. It’s not the noise that’s disturbing you. You’re disturbing the noise. In other words, you start commenting on it, “This is this way, that’s this way, why isn’t it this way?” And you go on and on and on. And the noise just does its thing. A lot of things in the world are like that. They do their thing. Some things we can change. Other things, if we had to change them, we’d have to do all sorts of unskillful things. So you say, “Nope, that’s where you draw the line.” And then you turn around and look at your mind. What you should do in advance, of course, is to train the mind so that no matter what happens, good or bad, things you can change, things you can’t change, you’re not going to suffer either way. That requires that you have some control over your thoughts. A thought comes into the mind, you want to be very careful to check it. It’s like the Buddha’s teachings on right speech. If you’re going to say something, the first question is, “Is it true?” You have to pass that test first. Then the second question is, “Is it beneficial?” If it passes that test, then the third test is, “Is this the right time and place for that?” For instance, thoughts of the heat. It’s true that it’s hot, but is it beneficial to think about it right now? Well, it’s beneficial to the extent that you make preparations, you drink plenty of water, get some salt, find a shady place. Okay, you’ve done that. That’s all you have to do to pay attention to the heat. Now you can turn all your attention to the breath. Learn how to draw those lines. In this case, the line is any thoughts that help keep you with the breath, get you interested in the breath, ask questions about how to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Those are useful thoughts. You let them in. As long as they’re helpful, then you let them in. If they’re not helpful anymore, even though they may be true, it’s not the time for them. You put them aside and just stay with the sensation of the breathing. Anything else that comes up, you say, “Nope, nope, nope. Got to draw the line.” This is an important principle in the practice. Some things the Buddha teaches us to have in an unlimited way, like unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. Those are things that we develop without limit. But even then, we have to have a sense of the time and place. When is the time for the first three, i.e. goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy? And when is the time for equanimity? Got to draw the line. There are people you want to help, but for some reason you can’t. You can’t help them. It’s either your karma or their karma or both. That’s when you develop equanimity. So even there, there’s a line. Same with the precepts. There are certain things you just will not do. No matter how much other people may be breaking the precepts and getting ahead in life, you’re not going to follow their example, because your real treasure is your precepts. Getting ahead in life, that’s something that’s really uncertain. Some people get ahead, they gain a position, but then they abuse it. In that position, it would have been better for them if they hadn’t had it to begin with. So that’s not really getting ahead, that’s getting behind. Whereas if you have to forego certain things in life, but you are able to maintain your precepts, that’s where you draw the line. The Buddha gave a teaching to his son one time on how important it was not to tell a lie intentionally. He said, “If you tell a lie intentionally and have no sense of shame about it, there’s no evil you will not do.” It may seem simple. A lot of us tell little lies. Otherwise, you can’t trust anyone who feels no shame about telling a lie, because they can say anything. They can do anything. He gave the example of an elephant being trained for battle. The elephant trainer notices that his elephant may be protecting its trunk, and so he knows that there are some things the elephant won’t do, because it’s wanting to protect its trunk. But if it doesn’t care about its trunk and it just jumps into the battle, there’s nothing it won’t do. Now, in elephants, that’s what you want, but in people, it’s not what you want. It’s the exact opposite. You want people who have some sense of the fact that certain things just shouldn’t be done. They know how to draw the line. Those are the people you can trust. That’s the kind of person you want to be, too. When we’re practicing concentration, again, we have to draw a line. Certain things we’re going to think about, other things we’re not. Thoughts about tomorrow, thoughts about yesterday, those aren’t useful right now. The useful thoughts are, “Where is my mind right now? Is it with a breath? Is it solidly with a breath? Is it comfortable with a breath? What can I do to make it comfortable?” Those kinds of thinking are perfectly fine. As long as the breath isn’t yet comfortable, you work with it. When it is comfortable, then you spread it around. In other words, think of the breath energy in the body. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s an energy flow in the nerves, an energy flow in the muscles. How can you take this spot of nice energy you’ve got going here with your breath and let it spread through the different parts of the body? So that your awareness is all around the body and the energy gets to flow. There’s a sense of really being comfortable right here, really being where you belong. As for any other thoughts that come by, just think that your awareness is like a screen on a window. The breeze comes through the screen, but the screen doesn’t move and it doesn’t catch the breeze. The breeze can just go right through. Sounds can go through. Thoughts can go through. You don’t have to hold on to them. What you hold on to is your concern for staying with the breath. So you’re here in the present moment, but you’re drawing lines in the present moment as well. Outside sounds, outside concerns, the heat outside, whatever, that’s none of your business right now. Your business is learning how to get acquainted with the breath, learning how to stay with the breath in a solid way, so the mind can have a chance to settle down. So that’s how you draw lines when you’re practicing concentration. It’s the same with discernment. You’ve got to draw lines. You’ve got to look for causes and effects. When you’re looking for skillful causes, those are things you want to develop, and then unskillful causes, those are things you abandon. And even though the unskillful things you might be doing here as you’re meditating may not be all that blatant, still there are certain things you’re doing in the present moment that are not quite skillful, certain ways of thinking about things, perceiving things that you’re holding on to. As long as you hold on to them, there’s going to be stress. Can you see that you have the choice not to hold on, that you’d be better off letting them go? That’s a line that you have to draw. You don’t just take on everything. You take on the things that you can see are causing stress. You abandon them. You take on the things you see are actually helpful in seeing these things clearly, and you work on developing those. So when you draw the right lines, in terms of your virtue, your concentration, your discernment, you find that even though you’ve placed certain things off-limits to the mind, the mind is a lot more free, because it’s not burdening us off with its unskillfulness. We like to think that we’re going around without any fetters on us, but we’re placing our own fetters on us from the inside. As long as we’re not willing to let go of the things that are weighing us down, or let go of the things that are blinding us to what we’re doing. So even though in the beginning, when we’re drawing lines like this, it may seem like we’re confining ourselves, we’re actually bringing ourselves into this central point right here where the mind and the body meet, and getting to know it really well. It turns out that the doorway or the portal to freedom lies right here. Freedom doesn’t lie in just doing whatever you feel like doing. Freedom lies in finding something inside that’s really valuable, that has no drawbacks at all. So be willing to draw a few lines, be willing to have to say no to certain things, so that you can say yes to a freedom that’s really genuine.

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