Wisely Ardent, Alert & Mindful

May 3, 2016

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. When we talk about breath here, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s also the flow of energy in the body that exists on many levels, and the most obvious flow that allows the air to come in and out of the lungs. So focus on any sensation of energy that corresponds with the in-breath and the out-breath, wherever it’s clearest. Let your attention settle there. See if you can make the breath comfortable. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Long breathing or short? If long breathing doesn’t feel comfortable, you can shorten it in a couple of ways. In-long and out-short, in-short and out-long, in-short and out-short. Heavy or light? Fast or slow? Shallow or deep? See what feels good for the body right now. We’re here focused on the breath as a way of training the mind. It’s hard to focus directly on the mind, so you give it something to focus on. As the mind stays steadily with the breath, you get to see your own mind. You get to see your mind a lot more clearly. This is really an essential skill if you’re looking for any kind of happiness in life, because it’s your ability to keep your mind under control that determines whether you’ll be able to experience happiness even in the midst of difficulties, or if you’re going to make yourself miserable no matter how good things are outside. It all depends on the state of the mind. One of the ways the mind destroys itself is it starts thinking about things that are going to make it miserable and that pull it down. So you have to learn how to steer it away from those things and keep it on something that’s really useful. So for the time being, practice staying with the breath. The breath is useful because it keeps you in the present moment, and that’s where you can observe the mind. You can observe the mind clearly. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. There’s no future breath you can watch, no past breath you can watch. So when you’re with the sensation of the breathing, the sensation of energy that flows through the body, you’re right here. If the mind wanders off from the breath, just drop whatever that thought might be and you’ll feel the sensation of the breathing again. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. No matter how many times it wanders off, just keep dropping the thought and bringing it back. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially gratifying, something that feels good deep down inside. That way the mind will be more inclined to want to come back. It makes it a lot easier for the mind to stay, because you’re fighting a lot of old habits. But we’re not here just for the ease. In the course of getting the mind to be focused here, we’re developing some good qualities. Three main ones stand out. They were in that chant just now. Ardent, Alert, Mindful. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Right now, it’s reminding yourself that you want to stay with the breath. Don’t forget that. It’s so easy to forget that and find yourself wandering off someplace else. But you keep reminding yourself again and again and again to come back, come back, come back. Sometimes you remind yourself of the good reasons to do this. We need a mind we can depend on. We tend to depend on people around us. We tend to depend on our own bodies for lots of things. But with the passage of time, the body’s going to begin to deteriorate, even though we don’t want it to. We thought we had a good pact with it. We took care of it. It would take care of us. But after a while, it seems to show that it doesn’t have any knowledge of that pact at all. We depend on other people to help us, and there’s an extent to which they can help us, but there come points where they can’t. That’s when you have to depend on the mind. So you’ve got to develop this quality to remind yourself that there are certain things that are good to think about and other things that are not worth thinking about. So remember that and keep that in mind. And then there’s alertness, the ability to notice what’s actually going on, and specifically what you’re doing. What are you doing right now and what are the results? You’re working with the breath. Does the breath feel good? Or are you wandering off someplace? You want to know what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. And then ardency is the quality of putting your whole heart into this to do it well. Once you notice you’ve wandered off, you don’t continue wandering off. You drop whatever the thought is and you come back. When you’re with the breath, you’re trying to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing sensation to get a sense of how you can improve the way the breath feels in the body. So the mind will be more and more inclined to want to stay, take an interest in what’s going on. After all, the flow of energy in the body is good not only for the mind but for your physical health as well. You want to notice if there are any areas where you’re tight or tense, where the energy flow doesn’t feel good. And if you don’t feel any energy flow, just ask yourself, “Are you feeling tense in different parts of the body?” You can make a survey. You can start at the navel and come on up the front. Notice where you’re holding tension that you don’t have to. Let it go, let it go. Up the front, through the head, then down the back, out the arms. Out the legs. Wherever you sense any unnecessary tension, one way you can check it is to compare left and right. How is your left shoulder compared to your right shoulder? Your left hip compared to your right hip? The knees, the ankles, the feet? Whichever side seems to be holding more tension, let it go. And as more blatant patterns of tension dissolve away, you may notice some more subtle ones. Let them go, too. In this way, you find that the present moment is a lot more interesting place to be than you may have originally thought. It’s straightening things out inside. The mind gets more and more firmly planted right here. In other words, you’re using your ingenuity, you’re using your discernment, to help in being mindful, ardent, and alert. These are the qualities that bring the mind under control. And we have these qualities to some extent, but oftentimes they’re used for the wrong things, or they’re directed in the wrong way. So for mindfulness, you say, “Okay, I’m going to stay right here, watch over the state of the mind, keep yourself with the breath, and then notice anything that’s going to pull the mind away from the breath.” That’s for the qualities of mind that help you stay with the breath. You want to encourage those. These are all things you want to remember. This is bringing wisdom to your mindfulness. And then you want to bring wisdom to your alertness. There are lots of things we could focus on in the present moment, but here we want to focus specifically on what we’re doing, because we shape the present moment in lots of ways. By the way we breathe, our experience of the present moment is determined a lot by how you just feel in your own body. And that’s affected by the way you breathe. And then the internal conversation you’ve got going. What are you commenting on? In the Buddhist terms, what are you directing your thoughts to and how are you evaluating it? What questions are you asking yourself? What issues are you focused on? Are they the most helpful ones or not? What perceptions are you holding in mind? In other words, what images and assumptions are you bringing to how you’re experiencing things right now? These things shape the way you process what’s coming into the senses. They come prior. So you want to be alert to these things. There are a lot of things in the world that are perfectly fine. If we approach them in the wrong way, we create a lot of suffering. There are things that may not be what we like, but if we approach them in the right way, we don’t have to suffer from them. The suffering stays, or the stress stays right on the surface. It doesn’t go deep inside, because we know how to process things properly. So being aware of how you’re processing these things and how to do it well, that’s when alertness becomes wise alertness. And then there’s ardency, the desire to do it well. You ask yourself, “What things are worth doing really well, and what things do you do simply to take care of your duties?” In other words, what are your priorities? The Buddha recommends that an important priority is learning how not to cling to things that create a lot of unnecessary suffering for yourself. Because it’s this unnecessary suffering that weighs you down. I mean, there’s stress that’s going to happen in life simply by the fact that you’ve got a body and you’re living in a world where things change. But that doesn’t have to weigh the mind down. What weighs it down is our craving and clinging. We feed on things that give the mind stress. We feel mind indigestion. So you want to learn how to develop the qualities that make it more and more independent. In other words, to give it an inner strength so it doesn’t have to constantly be feeding on this, that, and the other thing. And so developing any qualities that help make the mind more independent that way, those are things you want to be ardent in developing. As for things that pull the mind down, you want to be ardent in learning how to let them go. You want to take delight in letting go of the things that drag the mind down. Our problem is that many times our priorities are backwards. We like our cravings and clingings, and we don’t like the work that goes into being mindful and alert. We have to learn how to look at things in the long term, because the mind is here for the long term. The body grows and then it decays, but the mind remains. So you want to have something you can really rely on. So try to bring some wisdom to the way you’re mindful. In other words, how you relate to what you remember from the past, which things are worth remembering and which things are not, which things are worth applying to the present moment, and which things can you set aside. Simply let go. Wise in the way you approach the present moment. What are you doing right now? Where are you focusing your attention? Well, focus on what you’re doing. All too often we focus on what other people are doing, then letting our moods rise and fall with what they’re doing. So wise alertness pulls you away from that and focuses you back on what you can really have an effect on, what you can change and what you can have under your control, i.e., what you’re doing, what you’re choosing to do, and how you can best learn from whatever mistakes you notice you make. So you can get more and more skillful in handling the present. As for ardency, that’s focused both on the present and on into the future. What are you doing right now that will lead to good long-term results? Some things may be unpleasant right now, but they’re going to be good for you in the long term. How do you talk yourself into doing those things? Some things may be unpleasant right now, but they’re going to cause long-term harm. How do you talk yourself out of doing those things? That’s an important element in making your ardency wise. So make your mindfulness, alertness, and ardency as wise as you can. Because these are the qualities that are going to develop a sense of refuge inside, things that you can actually depend on. As other things in your life start to fall away, when these are strong, then you have good friends inside. When they’re wise, you have good friends inside. So exercise them every day. And this is the exercise that you start with, working with the breath. As these qualities get stronger around the breath, you find that you’re getting more you can apply them to other areas of life as well. It’s like exercising your body. It’s not just that the body’s going to be strong in the gym and then you leave your strong body in the gym. You have more strength to apply to the rest of your life. So a mind that you can depend on starts right here.

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