Directed Feeling

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One of the factors of concentration is that we direct our thoughts to the object. We’re directing our thoughts to the breath right now. Each time your thoughts veer away, you veer them back. You’re not just letting them wander all over the place. You’ve got a purpose. You’re directing your thoughts. It’s not just our thoughts that we direct. We’re also directing our feelings. You have to make yourself want to do this. The Buddha doesn’t make a sharp distinction between the mind and the heart. He uses the same word for both, citta. Because your thoughts are very closely related to your feelings, and your feelings to your thoughts. The difference, basically, is that with feelings, the thought has gotten into the breath, and from the breath it’s gotten into the body. It can make your heart race or it can make your heart slow down, depending on the feeling. This is something we do self-consciously. We’ve been doing this self-consciously ever since we were little kids. One of our defenses we had against our parents was that they wanted us to do something we didn’t want to do. We wanted to actually make ourselves sick. And we did that by making our feelings so strong that they had a real impact on the body. And that was a skill that we filed away. But then it comes back to haunt us. As we get older, sometimes we find that thoughts that are not in our best interest have learned how to get into the breath. And they can push us around in different directions. So we need skills in learning how to direct our thoughts and direct our feelings. Remember, feelings are not just your real you. We tend to think that things we think are fairly shallow, but our feelings are deeper and closer to who we really are. But they’re just as fabricated as your thoughts. As we meditate, we can learn how to make use of this fact. We can unfabricate them and create new ones. And it starts with the breath. If you find that your feelings are going off in the wrong direction, get in touch with your breath as quickly as you can and calm it down. Learn how to relate to the breath in a way that’s well-modulated. I had a friend who was a psychotherapist, and she was working for a while with some kids in a school. The kids had been in prison, and now they’re going to be reintroduced back into the regular educational system. She asked them some questions about their feelings. She had them rate different feelings on a scale from one to ten. “Do you have this problem? How strong are your feelings when that problem comes up?” She found that most of the kids had problems modulating their feelings. Everything was a ten. Your brother gets stabbed. It’s a ten. You have a date for a movie and you don’t have a dress. It’s a ten. You’re upset with your parents. It’s a ten. This is a case where the feelings have moved in and taken over the breath to the point where you can’t even think straight. So you’ve got to learn which feelings are ones that you definitely have to battle with and which ones are just toying with you. This is why we have the different ways of dealing with these things. If there’s a feeling that’s threatening to take over your actions, make you do something unskillful, you’ve got to fight it for all you’ve got. You use your breath, you use different ways of thinking, you use different ways of talking to yourself. You try to hold different perceptions in mind and see that that action is really disgusting or really harmful or really hurtful. So you can put the full brakes on yourself so that at the very least you don’t give in to the feeling. Other times your feelings are toying with you, in which case you don’t have to fight them off that much. In fact, the less attention you give to them, the better. But the important principle is remembering that just because there’s a feeling in there, you really feel about something. It’s simply a habit. And you want to learn how to direct your feelings in a different way, learn how to think in different ways, learn how to breathe in different ways, so that the feeling doesn’t have so much power and that you can actually create other feelings, other desires. Because when you look at a lot of our attachments, it’s not just an intellectual attachment, there’s an emotional attachment. The clinging to pain is not just an idea. It’s gotten into our system. So you need everything in your system, from the breath, which is the main element that controls what’s going on in the body, through your perceptions, just the images that you hold in mind around things. You see some people and you see them as monsters. You see others and you see them as cute little rabbits. And sometimes the perception is close to the reality and sometimes it’s not. And when it’s not, you’ve got to change it. Or if you find that it’s creating a really negative feeling tone for you, negative emotion for you, you’ve got to change the perception. Learn to look at a different side of reality. And look at how you talk to yourself around these things. Learn how not to get all the alarm bells going all at once. Notice that some problems are minor, others are more major. And even with the subtle ones, which ones you’ve got to be careful about. One of the big ironies is that we find sometimes we’re in nostalgia for the things that cause us suffering. This happens a lot when you practice and finally decide that you’re going to give yourself to the practice. You find yourself getting very attached to things that last year you wanted to run away from. That’s the mind being a traitor to itself. It’s sabotaging your well-being. So you have to learn how to direct your feelings and thoughts in another direction. This is where it’s good to understand the principle of heedfulness. Often when we hear the word heedfulness, we think of the negative side, that there are dangers out there. We have to be very careful how we act so as to avoid the dangers. But heedfulness has another side as well. It emphasizes the fact that you can develop good qualities. Don’t underestimate your ability. In Thai, when they’ve taken the word bhamata from Pali and turned it into the Thai word brahmat, one of the meanings it has, in addition to being heedless, is underestimating something. You underestimate dangers, but you also underestimate your good qualities. That’s what you’re brahmat. So to be heedful means that you also have a strong sense that you do have it within you to make these changes. After all, we are free and in the present moment to choose our karma right now. Things coming into the past, that’s just the past. You can’t do anything about it. You can’t go back and change the past. But you can change the way you relate to things coming in from the past. We all have this potential. The whole purpose of the meditation is to widen this potential, on the one hand, giving you new skills for dealing with things coming in from the past, but also just putting some space into the present moment as you get the mind more quiet. You learn how not to identify with things as they come up. You learn how to step back from them. That gives you some space. You can decide, “Is this something I want to go with or not?” Otherwise, the thought comes and it’s around us already. We’re in it. It’s like it’s swallowed us. But if you can step back from it, you can see it before it swallows you. You can step out of the way. Then you can decide. Do you want to follow a particular thought or feeling, or do you want to direct it in a new way? This way we can take more and more advantage of this freedom that we have, the potential for freedom that we have, and make it more actual. So as you’re directing your thought to the breath right now, remember you’re directing your feelings, too. You have to tell yourself, “This is something I want to do. I want to get my mind under control. I don’t want my mind to be a traitor to me. I want my thoughts and feelings to work together toward what is in my true best interest.” So we’re working here not just with the mind. We’re also working with the heart. Remember, there are two sides of one thing. You want to work with both sides. Remember that you can direct both sides. The concentration, the mindfulness, the discernment we’re developing, these are the tools that we need to do this. The various skills for dealing with one kind of feeling as opposed to another, the serious ones as opposed to the ones that are just toying with you, they’re all tools for your discernment. So try to make the best use of them.

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