Sensitive to the Mind

August 16, 2016

The Buddha’s instructions on how to deal with the mind while you’re focused on the breath are four steps. First is just to get sensitive to how your mind is right now. Are you feeling energized? De-energized? Was the work this afternoon so tiring that you’re feeling down? Or were you charged up by it? Or do you have some longer issues that weigh the mind down? You need to have a sense of where your mind is so you can have a sense also of where to move it. You don’t just sit there and look at whatever’s happening. The Buddha’s instructions are proactive. Each time you breathe in, there should be a purpose to your breathing, a sense of what you want to do with this breath. So once you’ve sensitized yourself to the state of the mind, the next step is to figure out how to bring it back into balance, if it’s out of balance. The Buddha’s first recommendation is to gladden the mind. This is an important principle throughout his teachings, that before you calm things down, you need to give yourself some energy. He talks about rapture coming before stillness, or rapture coming before calm. Because if you simply calm things down from the beginning, sometimes you can get depressed, which you don’t want. So what can you do to energize the mind? Sometimes it’s through the way you breathe. Try to breathe in a way that gives energy to the body and that will help energize the mind. Other times it’s simply by the way you think. If something in the events of the daily has gotten you down, think in other ways that pull you out of whatever that mindset is. We were talking earlier today about material loss. As the Buddha said, material loss is nothing compared to loss of your virtue, loss of your right view. So have that perspective. In this world where material gain and loss are everything, it’s good to be able to free yourself from that. Or if there’s some mistake you made in the course of the day that you feel bad about, remember that the best you can do is to remark that it was a mistake and to resolve not to repeat it. And then spread goodwill to yourself and goodwill to all beings. The goodwill to yourself is so you don’t keep beating yourself up over past mistakes. The goodwill to all beings is to remind yourself, “These are the people you want to help. These are the people you don’t want to harm.” Because if you get down in yourself, it’s very easy to get down in other people. Then you wonder, “Why bother?” Why bother putting in the effort to take your happiness or their happiness seriously, to have some goodwill? So whatever it is that’s got you down, think of ways of thinking around it to get you back up. You can think about recollection of the sangha, all those stories in the church. Tara-gatha and teri-gatha, monks and nuns who were almost suicidal, on the verge of committing suicide. And then they realized that this is not the way out. They came to their senses and they were actually able to become arahants. They were able to turn themselves around. You can do it too. Many times their problems are a lot worse than yours. So take heart. Find a good path. And it is a path that cuts through a lot of old karma. The Buddha’s teachings on karma are not designed to say, “Well, you deserve to suffer for this or you deserve to suffer for that.” The word “deserve” never appears in his teachings on karma. He often says that when you create lots of good new karma and change your view of the world to a right view, that can cut off a lot of the bad karma you’ve done in the past and weaken it a great deal. In fact, the more you develop yourself in virtue and discernment, the ability not to be overcome by pleasure and not to be overcome by pain, that greatly weakens whatever karma you’ve got from the past. So you’re doing something good and positive right now. Let that thought lift your spirit. You’re developing inner wealth. The inner world is very poor in inner wealth. So that’s gladdening the mind. If your mind is too erratic, has too much energy, then it needs to be steadied. You have to calm it down. One of the most effective karate chop is contemplation of death. Death can come at any time. Do you want your mind to be scattered all over the place when it comes? No, you want it to be focused. As for the things that you’re all scattered about, the issues that you’re thinking about, planning about, if death did come, all those thoughts and plans would be for nothing. You have to keep perspective on the things that are pulling you out and getting your mind scattered in all directions. If it’s simply a matter of excess energy, though, and not any particular issue, then it’s good to work with the energies in the body. Play with them. The mind has energy to think up new things. Think up new things with the breath. Breathe in places and breathe in ways that you haven’t breathed before. Breathe into the back. Breathe into the soles of your feet. Breathe into your hands. Think of the breath going down into the bones, into the spaces between your toes. Lots of different things you can do with the breath energy in the body. Think of the breath nourishing deep into the brain. As long as you’ve got the energy to think, think about things that are useful. Think about things that would get you more grounded. Think about things that would help you stay grounded here in the present. This is one way of steadying the mind, not just forcing it to be still, but taking an interest in what you’ve got right here, this big lump of a body sitting here right now. What have you got here? You’ve got the different elements, your sense of form as you feel the body from within, the warmth that’s called fire, the solidity that’s called earth, the liquidity that’s called water, and the energy that’s called wind. You can play with those things. Today would be a good day to think about coolness. Which parts of the body feel cooler than others? Let yourself focus there. Let the mind focus there and hang out there. Think of that coolness spreading to the different parts of the body. There’s lots to play with here, and in the playing around and in using your excess energy, you get the mind steadier, more focused. And finally, there’s releasing the mind, whatever’s weighing it down right now. And the weight here may be the weight of something depressing, or it may simply be the weight of greed, aversion, and delusion. See if you can lift that weight. Because release here means both temporary release and the greater release that comes at the end of the path. Well, you work first on the temporary release. To get the mind into concentration, you’ve got to release it from its unskillful mental qualities, release it from its fascination with sensual issues, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Any thoughts that come by? Stop dealing with any of those issues at all. Just let them go, let them go. Once the mind’s gotten to concentration, it’s begun to settle down, then try to notice, is there any disturbance in your concentration? Can you smooth it out by letting go of the disturbance, releasing the disturbance? This is where you apply the four noble truths. It’s not just an interesting set of views about things to think about. After all, there is the discernment that comes from listening to the truths and the discernment that comes from thinking them through. But the actual development of right view comes through developing all the other factors of the path. You get wiser as you work on right resolve, wiser as you work on right speech, and all the way down through right concentration. Apply that wisdom to your concentration. Where is the stress right now? Where is the unnecessary stress? There are some forms of stress that you’re feeling right now that, if you were to let them go, your concentration would unravel. It means you’re not ready to let go of those aspects of your concentration. But there are others that you can let them go and there’s no problem at all. In fact, the concentration gets lighter, it gets more refined. So look for those things. That’s a way of releasing the mind as well. So each time you sit down, focus on your breath. Take stock of where your mind is, not just where it’s focused, but also what its energy level is and what needs to be done to get the mind ready to be with the breath. And develop this standard but broad awareness. It brings you into right concentration and helps all the other factors of the path to mature. Once you get sensitive with your mind in the course of the meditation, then it’s a lot easier to get sensitive to it outside as well and to learn how to use some of the same techniques. If you find that the mind needs gladdening at any time of the day, there are ways of doing it, either with the breath or with the way you think. The mind needs steadying. You can do that any time of the day. The mind needs releasing. You can do that any time of the day. These skills you’re developing as you’re sitting here on the cushion, sitting here on the floor, are not just for sitting on the floor. They’re for you to use whenever you need them. So at the end of the meditation, don’t fold up your tools and put them away. Leave them right next to you because they’re useful all the time.

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