Releasing the Mind

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When you’re focused on the breath, you also have to be focused on the mind, to make sure the mind doesn’t go wandering off, to make sure that it’s in the right shape to stay with the breath. John Lee makes a comparison. He says it’s like a pulley. Your alertness has to be alert to the breath, what’s going on in the breath, then it has to come back and be alert to the mind. It goes back and forth, back and forth. Back and forth like a pulley. And you have to read the mind to see when it’s beginning to wander off so you can keep it there, so you can be on top of what’s happening. And as you’re settling down, you have to figure out, sometimes, if there’s a problem in settling down, the problem is with the breath. So you work with the breath. Sometimes the problem is with the mind. And you can work on the mind in various ways. The Buddha says there are basically three ways that you want to think about. One is to look at when the mind needs gladdening. In other words, to lift its spirits. Other times, when the mind needs to be made more steady in order to get it firmly implanted right here. And finally, the third is to release the mind, which can be releasing it from little things or big things, depending on what you’re doing. What needs to be dealt with in the mind. In terms of gladdening the mind, you can breathe in ways that give you more energy. Or you can think about topics that lift your spirits. Thinking back on your generosity, thinking back on your virtue. The times when you gave something you didn’t have to give, but you gave simply because you wanted to. That’s a sign of the worth of your own mind, and that gladdens you. You can think about your virtue. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, any aspect of the Buddha’s life that you find inspiring, anything in the Dhamma you find inspiring. When you’re feeling depressed about your own progress, you can think about the Sangha of the past, all those poems in the Theragatha. Well, the monks and the nuns were desperate. Their practice wasn’t going anywhere at all. Some of them even got suicidal, but they were able to come to their senses and turn themselves around. Think of that as an example that lifts your spirits. Sometimes, though, gladdening the mind means overcoming sleepiness. One way of doing that is to think about the fact that death could come at any time. If you really are sleepy and really are tired, it’s good to rest, but you want to check it first to see if it’s just not boredom. One way to get past boredom is to think about the fact that death could come at any time. Here we are in California, where the earthquakes can get strong. Maybe an earthquake can come, or maybe something happens in your body. A little clot in the bloodstream starts wandering around. It gets stuck in your lungs, stuck in your heart. Oop, that’s it. And you think, here you are just sitting around being bored, and it’s the last night of your life. It’s a waste. There’s work that needs to be done. That gives you the energy to start doing it. A lot of this depends on your own figuring your own psychology out, to know what motivates you, so you can get past the boredom that makes you sleepy and tired. As for steadying the mind, if you find that the breath is hard to follow, you can think about some other meditation topic. This is where it’s useful to choose the ones that, as the Buddha said, help to release you from unskillful states. This is when you realize the problem is not so much the breath, it’s the mind. You’re carrying in some mood left over from the day, and you want to get past it. This is one of the reasons why, before we meditate, there are two chants that we do very often. One we do every day, the chant of goodwill for all beings, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity for all beings. To get yourself out of your daily stories, you start thinking about all the beings in the universe. And you think about, are they happy? Well, most of them are not. Most of them are suffering pretty strongly. And the few that are really happier than you are, they’re going to fall someday. As you think about that, your goodwill shows you a lesson, which is that your sufferings, the daily sufferings of your family, your job, whatever, they’re really very small compared to all the suffering that’s out there in the universe. That thought can help erase the issues that you might be carrying in from your daily life. Another chant that we frequently do is the one on the five recollections, the five things to be considered every day. I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that I love. And I’m the owner of my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall there. As the Buddha said, you think these things and it gives rise to a sense of heedfulness, the realization that aging, illness, and death are coming in, moving in, and you’ve got to do something so you don’t have to suffer from them. And what can you depend on? The only thing you can depend on are your own actions. All the people you love, all the people you’ve depended on, you’ll have to be separated from them at some point. All you’ve got left is your actions. And where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. So if you want to be confident in your future, you have to get your mind trained. Thinking in this way can be one way of getting you ready to meditate. But the Buddha said it’s useful to think further. You’re not the only one subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. You’re not the only one who’s the owner of his or her actions. Everybody, no matter who, man, woman, child, ordained, not ordained, human beings, beings in the lower realms, beings in the higher realms, we’re all subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. In other words, no matter where you go in the universe, there’s no safe place. Sometimes we get jealous about other people’s power or beauty or wealth. But you have to remember, they’re going to lose it. The devas up in the heavens, they’re going to lose their position of devas. And many times when devas fall, it hurts more than when we fall, because they’re falling from a higher spot. In other words, they lose their status as devas and they fall to the lower realms, and it really hurts in comparison to what they used to have. So when you think in this way, it motivates you to want to find the way out. Is there someplace that hurts you? You’re no longer subject to the principle of action where the only place is nirvana, but it can be found through acting within the noble path. So that kind of thought helps get you in the right position. You notice the pattern here. You start thinking about all the beings in the universe, and it makes your own issues seem very small. And then you’re ready for the present moment. It’s somewhat like the Buddha’s knowledges on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge was the knowledge of his own lifetimes, stretching back many thousands. He remembered his name, his appearance, the type of food he had, his experience of pleasure, pain, and how he died. And then again, another name, another appearance, different pleasures, pains, food, die. That’s life. That’s it. And he saw that he had many high levels and low levels in his life. But he didn’t see the pattern. Why was it that he went up? Why did he go down? In other words, you compare it to yourself. You’re thinking about the events in your life, your stories of your daily life. You don’t really see the pattern if you’re constantly concerned about you, you, you, all the time, and the people right around you. But look at the Buddha. Instead of getting involved, he had one lifetime story. And he has thousands and thousands of lifetime stories. But he didn’t let himself get sucked in. He asked the question, “What’s the pattern here? What’s the larger pattern so I can find a way out?” That was when he moved to the second knowledge of that night, when he could see all the beings in the universe dying and being reborn. And he could see, once he saw the larger numbers, he could also see the larger pattern. It was because of their actions. Their actions came from their intentions. Their intentions were informed by their views. If they respected the noble ones and listened to their Dhamma, then they would tend to act in skillful ways. It was after that, after seeing the larger picture, that he was able to focus in on what needed to be done in the present moment, i.e., focus on your intentions, focus on your views. For him, it was what kind of view would give rise to the actions that would lead out. And he realized, finally, it was the four noble truths. He followed the duties with regard to those truths, and that’s how he gained awakening. Notice the pattern here. He starts with his stories, but then he drops his stories and looks for the larger pattern by encompassing the whole universe in his mind. Once he saw the larger pattern, he realized that where in the present moment he had to focus his attention, and he also had more motivation to focus it right on the right spot, he realized he had to get out. And this was the way out. So as you sit down to meditate, remember this pattern if you find that the events of the day are weighing on the mind. Think of all beings, either in the sense of wishing them all well, or thinking of all beings as being the owners of their actions, subject to aging, illness, and death, to make the events of your daily life seem as small as possible. And to give you more interest in the more important patterns, i.e., what’s going on in your mind right now, how you can change your intentions, how you can change your views, bring the mind to stillness so you can understand what’s going on. This way you take that big rock that’s on top of your heart and lift it off. Maybe you can’t lift it off for good yet, but at least you can lift it off for a little while. All the events of the day start to seem very, very small. And your awareness of the present moment becomes more and more important as you realize that this is the place where the real work is done. You’re here. You’ve got the instructions. You’ve got the abilities. Put that all together. That’s how you learn to release the mind.

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