Mindfulness in the Driver’s Seat

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The Buddha has an extended simile comparing the different parts of the practice to the different parts of a chariot. It’s important to notice that mindfulness is the driver of the chariot, not the passenger. In other words, it’s not just watching what’s going past. It’s actually deciding where the chariot should go. The horses are your conviction and your discernment that have to be yoked together. In other words, you have to be convinced that there is a way out of suffering, and your discernment is determined to find it. But mindfulness keeps telling you where to go. It’s important to remember that fact because there are so many different ways of defining more passive, simply receptive, accepting. And it’s not like the driver of the chariot is just going to accept wherever the horses want to go and not react when they go off the road. It wants to keep them on the road, on the path. So that’s the quality of mind we’re developing as we focus on the breath here. We’re not just watching the breath, we’re directing things in the mind. And we’re actually directing the breath. The Buddha gives his instructions on how to meditate with the breath. It’s very proactive. You make up your mind you’re going to breathe in a particular way or you’re going to breathe keeping something particular in mind. You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure, that gives rise to rapture. You try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Be aware of how the perceptions are having an impact on the mind. So there’s a direction to all of this. But to change the analogy for a bit, you do have to be grounded. This is why when the Buddha’s explaining how all the different frames of reference work together, he has you stay with the breath. In other words, you take the body as your primary frame of reference. You’re going to be here with the breath coming in and the breath going out. And you do what you can to stay there. And in the course of doing what you can, you’re going to discover you keep bumping into feelings and mind states. There are feelings of pain or discomfort that may be getting in the way. But you can also create feelings of pleasure. This is one of the Buddha’s important insights, that feelings don’t just come and go. There’s an intentional element in how you focus on different parts of your body, focus on different sensations. And you can either amplify a pain or you can amplify a pleasure. We’re pretty good at amplifying pain. But here’s an opportunity to learn how to amplify pleasure. How do you breathe in a way? How do you maintain attention to the breath in a way that allows for a pleasant feeling? As John Lee says, it’s a matter of trying to make the breath as smooth as possible. You can think of a fine thread of silk. Make sure it has no frayed parts. It’s a clean thread, all the way in, all the way out. And simply paying attention to that breath, making your attention as clean and unfrayed as the thread, makes the breath comfortable. You don’t have to squeeze it or force it in any way to make it comfortable. Simply the fact that you pay very steady attention to it will make the breath more comfortable. That’s an important lesson right there, that feelings that come up in the body don’t always come up just willy-nilly. You can play a role in shaping the direction they’re going to go. That’s one of the things that the driver wants to keep in mind, the driver of the chariot. You’re driving the chariot toward a pleasant way of breathing. The same with the states of the mind. If hindrances come up, you don’t want to just be with them or let yourself be surrounded by them. You’re trying to get out. You’re trying to replace them with more skillful states of mind. In other words, if the mind has trouble staying with the breath, you’ve got to figure out if the problem is with the breath or with the mind. If the breath seems comfortable but the mind is not sticking with it, okay, there’s something wrong. The mind has got to look there. This is where the Buddha talks about learning how to gladden the mind when you’re feeling down, how to steady the mind when the mind is scattered all over the place, and how to release the mind from the things that are making it feel burdened. Again, these are directions for the driver. You’re not just sitting with whatever mind state comes up. Use your knowledge of the breath. Use your ability to create pleasant feelings of the breath and also to change your perceptions so as to get the mind in the right place. If you’re feeling oppressed at work or in your family, you’ve got to learn how to rethink that perception. If you’re feeling lost for somebody, learn how to rethink that perception. Just to bring the mind back. Bring it back to the breath. Sometimes working with your perception of the breath will change the mind’s willingness to stay with it. If your perception of the breath is narrow and constricted, the mind won’t want to stay. But if you think of it as something broader, more open, the breath coming in all directions, your mind is sitting or surrounded, surrounded by breath. And if you can simply relax into that sense of being surrounded by something comfortable, don’t pay any mind to the pains here and there—little pains in your back, little pains in your hips, in your knees. You can think of the pleasant breath energy surrounding them, drowning them. They may still be there, but they don’t have to weigh on you. So there you are. As you focus on the breath, you’re also dealing with feelings, you’re also dealing with mind states. As for dhammas, mental qualities, again, they’re there in the mind. Either you’re going to be dealing with hindrances and trying to put an end to them, or dealing with the factors of concentration, trying to give rise to them. And when you do that, you can do it at the breath. You want to get the mind into jhana, you want to get the mind in a good, strong concentration. You don’t take concentration as your object. You take the breath as your object. And then bringing in whatever other qualities will help you stay with the breath, with a sense of ease, having that same sense of consistency, that smooth thread of your attention that stays steady all the time. All the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Everything’s right here. All the things you might need to know about. Those four frames of reference are useful because they point out possible areas where you may have to adjust things to get the mind to settle down. Remember, this chariot being driven by mindfulness is heading toward right concentration. It’s not just wandering all over the place. You’re trying to get the mind to be here, solidly, with the breath. You want a sense of being balanced, a sense of feeling at home here in the breath. And that’s when the chariot’s going where you want it to go. So the breath is the main topic. But you’re always going to be bumping into feelings, you’ll be bumping into different mind states, bumping into different mental qualities. Stay with the breath. So learn to use those as a checklist for when things are not going right, what things might you want to change. Which spots in the path do you want to turn a little bit left? Which ones do you want to turn a little bit right? But the goal is to get here and be solidly with the breath. Because that’s your anchor in the present moment. And when you’re in the present moment, you can see things going on in the mind much more clearly than if you just float around trying to keep track of thoughts or float around trying to keep track of feelings. It’s so easy to get sucked into those thought worlds, those feeling worlds, if you don’t have the breath as your anchor. So don’t worry that you’re missing out on anything else. Everything you need to know is right here. And that way you keep your conviction and your discernment on course.

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