It’s All Right Here

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The path can sometimes seem intimidating, especially when you think of all the things that eventually you will have to give up. Even Ajahn Mahaprabhu, who’s famous as being one of the fiercest and strictest of the Ajahns in the forest tradition, said he was intimidated by the path when he was young. Then he realized that the Buddha didn’t set the path up as an executioner to destroy people’s happiness. Quite the contrary. It’s a step-by-step instruction on how you find genuine happiness inside. What should be intimidating is the idea of not following the path. Think about all the suffering that you’re going to have to go through if you don’t figure out a way to put an end to the mind’s habits of creating lots and lots and lots of unnecessary suffering for itself. So when you find that prospect intimidating, then it’s a lot easier to look at the path and say, “Okay, I can take it step-by-step.” You literally take it breath-by-breath. You focus on this breath now. You don’t have to think about the breath you just left, and you don’t have to think about the next breath. Just this breath, coming in and going out. And then this one, and noticing how it feels. You don’t have to figure out a lot of philosophy. You don’t have to figure out a lot of theory. The theory is there to help give you some pointers on what to look for, to highlight things that often seem obscure or blurry inside the mind. It’s like the book of vocabulary they teach to people who are learning how to be professional tasters. They work out a very precise vocabulary for describing smells and describing tastes. And the bigger your vocabulary and the more you can identify which smell, which taste, corresponds to which word, the more you see the subtle gradations. The more you can pick up. You taste something and you know what’s in it. It’s the same with the theory in the meditation. It’s there to point out what’s going on in your mind right now. So you’ve got your awareness and you’ve got your breath. And the qualities you want to bring to this are three. Mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means remembering. In this case, remembering what you want to look for, and when you find something you recognize, what you do with it. It’s recognizing that some of the things you’re going to find in the mind are skillful and some of them are not. And so if something is skillful, you want to learn how to encourage it. If it’s not skillful, you want to learn how to discourage it. And what you find is that as you practice, that knowledge will become more and more precise. Alertness means looking at what you’re doing right now and what the results are. It’s not just an unfocused awareness or receptivity of the present moment. It’s very specific. What’s important right now is what you’re doing and the results you’re getting to see if you really are doing what you’re supposed to be doing. And if you are getting the results you hope for, and if you’re not, just make note of that fact. Then the third quality, ardency, is trying to do all of this well. If the way you’re breathing is not easy to stick with, breathe in another way. If it is easy to stick with, then you try to maintain that kind of breathing. The same with the point of your focus. You can focus in the tip of the nose, you can focus in the middle of the head, the top of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, just above the navel. Lots of places in the body where you can be focused right now. And test them. See what feels good for you right now. Ardency like this works because you do have a lot of options. This is the Buddha’s basic teaching on karma. Your old actions are yielding results now, but they’re not going to be a full experience until you’ve shaped them into something right now. So you have the option of choosing which of the potentials from the past you’re going to focus on. Then you have the option of what you’re going to do so you can turn it into an actual experience of the present moment. It’s like the raw material, the ingredients for a dish that you’re going to eat. And some of them you can’t eat until you’ve fixed them. So you look in the refrigerator and what have you got? You’ve got some rotten vegetables, but you’ve got some good ones. Now, if you’re really skilled, you can take the rotten vegetables and make something good out of them. But in the meantime, try to focus on the good things, the good ingredients you’ve got. The Buddha talks about three ways you can shape them. First, through the way you breathe. Secondly, through the way you talk to yourself about what’s going on. And then thirdly, through the perceptions you hold in mind, in other words, the labels and images you hold in mind. And then the feelings of pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain. So try to find a part of the body that feels comfortable right now. It doesn’t have to be extremely blissful or anything like that. It just feels relatively comfortable. And see if you can keep it comfortable all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Hold that perception in mind. Find that this is something you want to maintain. And it is an energy flow in the body. It’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose. There’s an energy flow in the body. And that energy flow can go through the atoms of the body. It penetrates everything. If you hold that perception in mind, you’ll find that the energy does flow a lot more smoothly. Then you can ask yourself some sort of gentle nudging kind of question. “How does it feel now? How does it feel now?” And if it feels good, say, “It feels fine.” If it doesn’t feel good, you say, “Well, what can we do to change?” The Buddha has a technical term for all of this. It’s called sankhara. It means fabrication. It’s the way you fix things in your present moment. And you’re doing it all the time. It’s just now you’re learning how to do it with a little bit more awareness. As the Buddha said, if you do this in ignorance, you’re going to suffer. But if you do it with awareness, it can actually form the path to the end of suffering. So these things are all here. There’s nothing exotic about it. It’s just getting the vocabulary and learning to apply it in a way that you actually get results. That’s what you’re looking for here, trying to develop those three qualities of ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. And for the ardency, you’re trying to do this process of fashioning or fabrication with as much skill as you can, with as much awareness as you can. So the three qualities all go together. You’re remembering the terms and you’re remembering what’s worked in the past. And as you find that something works, you try to remember that too. And it’s the alertness that notices, “This is what you did and this is what you’re getting as a result.” Or, “This is what you’re doing right now and this is what you’re getting as a result right now.” This is not the case that your actions are going to wait until the next lifetime to give all the results. Some of them are right here, right now. In fact, without your present fashioning of things, you wouldn’t have an experience of the present moment at all. So this is what we’re looking for. How we’re doing this and how we can do it with more skill. Now there’ll be times when the mind has trouble staying with the breath, either because it’s too drowsy or too antsy. You can shift to other topics. If you’re feeling lazy, you can think about death. Death could come at any time. California has all these earthquake faults. You never know when the big one’s going to come. And your body has all these things that can go wrong very suddenly, without any notice. You can ask yourself, “Are you ready to go?” We think about this not to get ourselves scared, but to realize that if we have to go, we want to go well. And what does that mean, to go well? It means getting your mind in good shape. So you think about that until it gives you the encouragement to really stick with the practice. Then you get back to the breath. If you’re feeling discouraged about your progress, you can stop and think about some of the good things you’ve done in the past. The times when you were generous and didn’t have to be generous. The times when you were stuck by the precepts, even though you could have gotten away with breaking them. And you realize that you have some worth as a human being. You can do that much good, or you can do the good of the meditation, too. You can think thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. If something comes up in your mind, something you did to somebody in the past that was less than honorable, just spread goodwill to that person. Spread goodwill to yourself. Remind yourself you can’t go back and undo those things. So sitting here and going over them again and again and again is not going to accomplish anything. Just know that that was a mistake, and it’s a mistake you don’t want to repeat. And the way you give yourself the energy not to repeat it is to spread goodwill to the other person and goodwill to yourself. So these are some of the things you can think about to get the mind in the proper mood to get back to the breath. This is right here in this process of fabrication, because the breath is a kind of fabrication. It’s how you shape your experience of the body right now. The way you breathe has a huge impact. It has an impact on your sense of the body as you feel from within, what they call proprioception. So take advantage of that fact. Talk to yourself about the breath. Hold an image of the breath in the mind that’s soothing, an image that allows you to think that the breath is coming in and out of the body from any direction, out any direction, smoothly, without any interruption. And you find that your sense of the present moment, when you shape it in these ways through what’s called bodily fabrication, the breath, verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself, mental fabrication, your perceptions and feelings, really does have an impact. And it has an impact not only while you meditate, but as you go out for the rest of your life. So take advantage of that fact. Do this with awareness and not with ignorance. And the old habits you have of causing yourself unnecessary suffering can get converted. It’s not that you’re not going to fabricate. The very end point of the practice is that you get from the mind to a point of equilibrium where it doesn’t need to fabricate anything anymore. And that’s when it can open up to something unfabricated. But in the meantime, you learn how to fabricate things in a better way, the same way that an artist learns how to do new things with his or her art. Take the same old basic paints or the same old basic notes on the piano and do something new. Be more alert to what you’re doing. Be more alert to the possibilities of what you can do. And you find that that path, which seems so intimidating to begin with, becomes more and more your path. You get a sense of ease with it, a sense of familiarity, by focusing on the details of what you’re doing right now. You don’t have to think about how long it’s going to take or how big the job is. If you focus on the details, the path will open up right here.

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