Intro to the Skill of Meditation

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Check your posture. Make sure that you’re sitting comfortably. You want your back to be relatively straight. Make sure you’re balanced left to right, not leaning forward, not leaning backwards. Look ahead and then close your eyes. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. When we focus on the breath, we’re actually focusing on the sense of energy flow in the body that allows the air to come in the lungs and then go out. We try to see how that relates to other energies in the body as well. But for the time being, focus primarily on the areas where the movement of the breath is most obvious. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel comfortable there. Long? Short? Or in long, out short? In short, out long? Heavy? Light? Fast? Slow? Deep? Shallow? Experiment. Try to find what rhythm of breathing feels good now. At the same time that you’re watching the breath, you’re also watching the mind as it focuses on the breath, to make sure it stays. You want to be sensitive to what you’re doing. This is what the meditation is all about. We hear about the great visions the Buddha had on the night of his awakening. Visions of the cosmos, visions of other levels of being. But those aspects of his awakening he gave only in a very quick sketch, brief outline. He didn’t go into the details. And I know some people say they’re disappointed in the accounts of the Buddha’s awakening, that there weren’t more of the details. But you notice that when the Buddha talks about his own awakening, when he boils it down to the most essential message, it’s a principle of causality, in particular how it relates to your actions and how your actions relate to your experience. That’s it. Because that’s the part of the awakening that solves the big problem, which is that we all want happiness, and everything we do and say and think is for the sake of happiness. Yet all too often we end up creating pain, stress, suffering for ourselves and for other people. The question is, why? Where are we going wrong? And the Buddha said, “It’s two things, craving that comes from ignorance.” And the word ignorance in Pali, avijja, means not only just not knowing certain things, it means lacking skills. We don’t know what we’re doing. We’re not skillful in what we’re doing. And that’s why we create suffering. So the purpose of the meditation is to get more sensitive to what you’re doing, bring some knowledge to it. That way, your actions, instead of leading to suffering, will lead to an end of suffering. So we’re working on a skill here. The knowledge we need to bring to this is the fact that craving based on ignorance is going to lead to suffering. But then there are other actions that are based on different kinds of desires. There’s the desire to be skillful, the desire to abandon unskillful actions, that can lead to the end of suffering. So you want to look carefully at your desires, look carefully at your intentions, because these are the main causal factors that the Buddha was talking about when he talked about how a principle of causality affects your experience of the present moment. What it boils down to is the fact that what you’re experiencing right now is a combination of three things. The results of your past actions, then your immediate actions in the present moment, and the results of those actions in the present moment. This means that what you do right now will have an impact both on right now and on into the future. And what you’re experiencing right now comes from past and present actions. This means that what you’re experiencing right now is not totally determined by the past. In fact, the way you pay attention to things, your intentions right now, play a huge role in shaping what you’re experiencing right now. So you can make a difference. This is where we generally lack skill, because we’re not sensitive to what we’re doing. But as you focus on the breath, and the mind begins to settle down, then you can see clearly the actions of the mind. You get more sensitive to the way you breathe. You get also more sensitive to the way you talk to yourself. What kind of conversations are going on in your mind right now? You want to direct them all to the breath. Any comments, any questions, any mental chatter at all that’s not related to the breath, you can just let it go. Think of your mind as being like a large committee, and the meeting is kind of raucous. Lots of people have lots of different opinions about where you should go, what you should do, what you like, what you don’t like. Just let all that fade away into the background. What you bring to the foreground is how you’re breathing right now and how you’re sensitive to how the breathing affects your experience of the body. Ask yourself questions about that. Make comments about that. If you’ve been doing long breathing for a while, ask yourself, “Does it feel good? Or is it getting too long?” And make a change. If the breath is too light and you can’t follow it, breathe more heavily. If you do wander off, drop whatever it is that you’re thinking about and come back to the breath. This is a quality called ardency. It’s one of the three qualities the Buddha said have to be brought to the meditation. Mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness, the ability to watch what you’re doing right now and to see the results. And ardency. The desire to do this well. So with mindfulness, you’re remembering to stay with the breath. And any good lessons you’ve learned from the past about staying with the breath, you try to remember those as well. And you also remember that if the mind wanders off, you’re not going to follow it. Alertness is what actually watches what you’re doing. If you catch that you’ve wandered off, be alert to the fact. And then bring in some ardency and bring yourself back. While you’re with the breath, be alert to how it feels. And then use some ardency in learning how to be really sensitive to how it feels. Because the in-and-out breathing, or the energy of the in-and-out breathing, is a part of a much larger field of energy that goes throughout the entire body. And as you get more sensitive to the breathing energy, then you begin to sense how it relates to the rest of the body. You can allow your awareness to spread so it fills the entire body. Think of the sense of ease from the breath going down the back, out your legs, going down your shoulders, out the arms, radiating all over the body, so that the body is suffused with a sense of well-being. If you can maintain this larger frame of awareness, it’s going to be harder for the mind to slip off. You want to be fully here in the present moment. Make your awareness fill the body. Think of the breath filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body, all of these things going together. This is your foundation. As you make this foundation, solid, you get better and better at observing the mind. When it goes off, why does it go off? What is it looking for? You don’t have to follow it. Look for that first impulse. And when you say “no” to the impulse, that’s when you get to know it. It’s like building a dam across a river. You look at the surface of the river and you have no idea what the currents are down in the deeps. That’s when you build a dam. That’s when you learn how strong the currents are down there. The same with the mind. We have these currents of the mind, you might say, that go flowing out. And as long as you don’t get in their way, they seem perfectly fine. But then, as I said, so many times they come back and they bring back suffering, they bring back pain, they bring back trouble. So something’s wrong. Any thought that goes out from the breath, you say “no.” And then you get to see it more clearly, the steps by which the mind creates a thought and then runs with it. And when you see the steps clearly, that’s when you begin to see this is where the mind goes wrong, this is where it goes right. You can sort these things out because you’re bringing knowledge to the process. You begin to see not only the way the mind talks to itself, but also the images, its own sort of code of how it communicates messages to itself without even saying things in full sentences. You want to see that in action because all too often those images color everything else we think, everything else we experience. Then you can gain some control over that. Because what we’re trying to do here is not simply experience something cosmic and wonderful. We’re trying to see what it is that the mind is doing that’s creating suffering. And we want to see how we can stop. That means you have to get very sensitive to the intentions of the mind in the present moment, which in turn requires that you get firmly based in the present moment so you can see these things. Now, this is a skill that each of us has to do for him or herself. No one else can do it for you, as with any skill. People can give you advice, recommendations, set examples. But the skill is something you have to master on your own by watching your own actions. John Lee gives images of weaving a basket, sewing a pair of pants, making clay tiles, making objects out of silver. In every case, he says, you learn from the teacher, but then you have to look at your products, the things you make yourself, and learn how to judge them properly. And then figure out where you went wrong and go back and do it again. This way your skill develops, by learning from the object that you’ve made. So here we’re trying to make a state of concentration in the mind by focusing on the breath. This is how the Buddha gained his awakening. Which means that everything you really need to know is right here. We don’t need to see the cosmos. We don’t need to see other levels of being. All we need to see is what we’re doing right now and how we can do it better. And although it seems very prosaic and very common, it opens up other dimensions in the mind. They should get more and more subtle and more and more deep in your investigation. You find there are things there in the mind that you wouldn’t have expected. It is possible to find a dimension in the mind where there is no suffering. But to get there requires skill. So work on the skills and they’ll take you where you want to go.

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