Taming the Mind

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When we meditate, we’re training the mind, because the trained mind is what brings happiness. The untrained mind can bring us all kinds of trouble. It can start thinking about things that create a lot of suffering, a lot of worry, a lot of regret. There are times when it seems to run out of control. That’s because we haven’t learned a skillful way to bring it under control. Sometimes our efforts to bring it under control are too heavy-handed or misapplied. We start mistrusting the idea of control. But if you do it wisely, then the mind will be tame and it will do what you want. It’ll think in ways that bring happiness to yourself and other beings. This is why we’re here. Focus on the breath. Create a boundary for yourself right now, saying that anything that’s outside of your body right now, you’re not going to think about it. You’re just going to think about and pay attention to how the body feels from within. The breath is the most prominent thing that you notice as you feel from within. It comes in and goes out. Try to notice where you feel it. You may be feeling it in places where you expect it, and you may be feeling it in places where you don’t. But it’s good to get in touch with how it feels from inside. You can try a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths to emphasize the sensation of breathing. Then, when you’re clear about it, you allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels good. You can try even longer or shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow. When we think of breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy throughout the body. The most obvious flow, of course, is the flow that accompanies the air, that allows it to come in and go out. But as you get more sensitive to the body, you begin to realize there’s a sense of flow everywhere. It’s more prominent in some places, and those are the places you want to focus on. You focus on what you can see clearly. And as you get more sensitive, then you’ll begin to detect it in other parts of the body as well. But choose a spot that feels good. Choose a rhythm that feels good. And that’s a necessary part of establishing mindfulness. We sometimes hear that mindfulness is a broad, open, accepting state of mind. It doesn’t judge anything. But that’s not how the Buddha taught it. For him, mindfulness is a kind of restraint. It’s an establishing of boundaries, your territory right here. The image he gives us of a quail in a field that’s been turned up by a plow. As long as the quail stays in the field, it’s safe. If you try to get it, you can’t even see it because it can hide behind the stones that have been plowed up. The Buddha tells the story one time of a quail who wandered outside of the field. A hawk swooped down and caught it. As it was being carried off, the quail said, “Ah, just my bad luck. I wandered away from my ancestral territory. If I’d stayed in my ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me.” Well, the hawk was a lot bigger. It was peaked a little bit. The hawk said, “Where is your ancestral territory?” The quail said, “In a field, all plowed up.” So the hawk let the quail go. The quail said, “Okay, go there, but you won’t be able to escape me.” So the quail gets down on one of the stones in the field and starts taunting the hawk, “Come and get me! Come and get me, you hawk!” So the hawk swoops down again, and as the quail sees that the hawk is coming at full speed, it hides behind one of the stones. The hawk hits the stone and dies. The image here, of course, is that the unskillful parts of the mind can’t catch you as long as you stay in your territory. But to stay in the territory, you don’t want to feel hemmed in. This is why we work with the breath. When the breathing feels good, think of that comfortable sensation spreading through the nerves of the body, through the blood vessels of the body. Up through the brain, down through the intestines, all over. Learn to make this a pleasant place to be. Then you’ll be more likely to want to stay. The image they give in the canon is of an elephant that’s been captured in the forest and brought into the city. It’s tied to a post. At first it’s going to pull and pull and pull and try to get away from the post, but then it’s going to get food. They even play music for it. In the old days, they would play flutes for elephants. So the elephant finds that it really is a good place to be, right there next to the post. When it gets more tamed, then they can cut the chain and it’ll stay. Not because it’s forced to, but because it realizes that this is a good place to be here among human beings. The same with working with the breath. In the beginning, the mind’s going to pull here and pull there. You’re going to be with the breath, then you’re going to drop it. Then you’re going to come back again, and you’re going to drop it again. But if you couple your mindfulness with alertness—in other words, watching what’s actually going on—and then a quality called ardency, where you’re trying to do this well. In other words, as soon as you catch yourself wandering off, you come right back. You don’t leave the mind to wandering around, sniffing at the flowers, and playing with the baby animals. You realize you’ve got work to do. So you bring it right back to the breath. While you’re with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible. This is what ardency means. While you’re here in your territory, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels and how it might be improved. Now you might take that sense of well-being and spread it around in the breath. The best way is to spread it to areas you might normally miss. Try to be as systematic and as thorough as possible. This way the sense of ease and well-being becomes a lot more expansive, more subtle, and goes deeper. So like the image of the elephant, you find this really is a good place to stay. Everybody has a similar image. He says it’s like having a child. You want to keep the child entertained at home? Well, you give it a doll to play with. The doll here is your body as you feel it from within. You can think of making it heavy, making it light, making it warm, making it cool. There are lots of potentials right here that you can focus on. Just don’t focus on the pains. Focus on the areas that you can make comfortable. You’ll find that the mind is more and more likely to want to stay in its territory. As for any distracting thoughts that may come up, just put them aside. You don’t need them right now. You’ve got something better to do right now. You’re learning about the breath and the body. If some of those thoughts are really insistent, you can stop and think, “Where do these thoughts lead you? Are they really your friends? Will they take you someplace and get you to do something you know is not in your best interest?” Then remind yourself you have something better to do, something that will be in your best interest. You can put those thoughts aside if they’re still there. Just learn how to ignore them. In other words, you don’t have to be responsible for every thought that comes into the mind right now. Think of your mind as being like a committee. Some members of the committee are off chatting away. But you don’t have to engage in their conversations. You don’t even have to listen to them. As you get more sensitive to the breath and the body, you begin to realize that the simple act of thinking creates a pattern of tension someplace in the body. If you can find that pattern of tension, just breathe through it and the thoughts will go away. It’s in this way that you’ll learn how to tame your mind so that it will think the thoughts you want it to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want it to think. And you’ll get a better sense of what kind of thinking really is worth while. And that’s the kind of mind that will bring you happiness. You’ll be happy to do good things for yourself, happy to do good things for other people, because it listens to you and does what you want it to do. you

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