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Jon Foong used to say that when you meditate, you want to catch hold of the breath. And so that’s what I tried to do—catch it, hold it, squeeze it. Of course, that didn’t work. One day I was meditating on my own, actually sitting on a bus in Bangkok, and I realized that if I let the breath have its freedom, then it really felt good, and my mind could settle down with it easily. So, being a typical Westerner, I went back and I criticized Jon Foong for saying to catch hold of it. He laughed. He said, “It doesn’t mean to hold it, tense up around it. The word for ‘catch’ in Thai can also mean simply to stick with something.” That’s what you’re doing as you’re meditating. You’re sticking with the breath. You don’t want to put too much pressure on it. But you do want to put enough pressure on your mind so that it stays. A classic image is holding a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too loosely, it’ll fly away. If you hold it too tightly, it’s going to die. So you have to stick with the breath, follow it. That’s what the word anupasana means. It’s a breath that you hold, and it’s important that you understand the relationship between right mindfulness and right concentration. We read the instructions for right mindfulness, and they’re actually instructions for how you get the mind into concentration. If you were to make a comparison, the description of right mindfulness is the recipe, and the description of right concentration is talking about the various levels of jhana that you can get into. Those are the restaurant reviews. Saying, “This is good, but this is better, and this is even better.” There’s a problem sometimes when we try to reverse-engineer from the restaurant reviews. But it’s good to just know the recipe. Stick with the recipe. The Buddha says that you keep track of the breath in and of itself. The keeping track of, sticking with, watching, following. Those are all meanings of the word anupasana. The word anu means to follow, and pasana means to watch. So you follow it and you watch it. The more consistently you can stay here, the more you’re going to see. This is what the purpose of mindfulness and concentration is, to see what’s going on. Remember the Buddhist analysis of suffering. It’s not something coming in from outside. It’s what you’re doing. You want to get the mind in a state where it can clearly see what it’s doing. And by sticking with the breath, you’re focusing the mind on something very close to the mind. That’s why you can watch the mind and the breath at the same time. Then you bring in three qualities–mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind, like right now you’re remembering to stay with the breath. You can also remember what’s worked and what hasn’t worked in the past as you’re trying to stay with the breath. And you remember that your task here is to notice skillful and unskillful qualities of mind as they come up. The skillful qualities should be encouraged, and the unskillful ones should be allowed to go away. This is different from what you may have heard about mindfulness. It’s simply watching things coming and going. But that’s not the Buddhist definition. He defines it as the faculty of the memory, your ability to recall, as he says, things said and done a long time ago. You want to remember and recall things that are useful for right now. One of them is to remember how to stay with the breath. So you’re alert to what you’re doing. When you focus on the breath, there’s going to be a perception in the mind, an image, of how the breath runs in the body. And you can play with that. This is where alertness gets together with ardency. You watch the breath, you watch the mind watching the breath, and then you ask yourself, “Are they staying together?” If they’re not, what can you do to make them fit more closely? It’s like a carpenter putting together two pieces of wood. If they don’t quite fit, which part do you sand? In this case, do you sand the mind or do you sand the breath? Sanding the mind means looking into what attitudes it’s bringing, or if there are any other thoughts that pull it away, what kind of thoughts are they? Because sometimes, as you settle down with the breath, the mind is not ready to be with the breath. So you have to get it in the right mood. The Buddha gives a list of what he calls the five hindrances, things that get in the way. Sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt. If any of those are getting in the way of your settling down, there are specific ways of dealing with them. With sensual desire, you try to reflect on the drawbacks of sensuality. Sensuality here doesn’t mean sensual pleasures. It means your mind’s fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning for sensual pleasures. You can stop and think. To what extent does your mind tend to lie to itself about its sensual pleasures? When the field of positive psychology got started, they were trying to study people’s relationship to happiness. They began to realize that a lot of people think that certain things make them happy, but if you ask them while they’re actually doing them, they’re not all happy at all. But then the memory gets elaborated and cleaned up. Then you remember these things as happy, so you want to do them again. So just reflect on the extent to which the mind tends to lie to itself over sensual pleasures. As for ill will, the Buddha recommends spreading thoughts of good will first for yourself. If you let yourself get overcome by ill will and anger, you’re going to do and say stupid things. Do you really want to do that? There’s that tendency, when anger takes over, that what pops into the mind as the best thing to say generally seems like the best thing to say. Then again, you have to remember the mind tends to lie to itself when it’s angry. It narrows things down, puts aside all sense of shame and compunction, gets tunnel vision, focuses on one thing that’s wrong, acts on that tunnel vision, and then after the whole thing is over, you begin to realize the mind is blinding itself. With sloth and torpor, there’s the pleasure of resting. This is very easy to get into. As the mind is getting concentrated, you’re focusing on the comfortable breath. You drop the breath and you just focus on the sense of comfort. Things begin to blur out. They feel really nice. But you zone in and zone out. That kind of stillness does not lead to knowledge. Remember, we’re trying to keep track of the breath. So no matter how comfortable things get, you want to stay with this perception of breath coming in, breath going out, breath going through the body. All around you. And expand your awareness. When the mind gets drowsy, its awareness begins to shrink. So consciously expand your awareness to fill the whole body. As for restlessness and anxiety, if you’re anxious about the future, remind yourself you don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know that you will need a lot of mindfulness. Mindfulness and alertness and discernment to deal with the unexpected. But this is how you develop those qualities, focusing on the breath. As for doubt, this can be doubt about the teachings, doubt about yourself, your ability to practice the teachings. If you don’t plunge into the meditation, you’re not going to know. It’s like standing on the edge of a lake, afraid that it’s too cold to go into, but you don’t even stick your toe in. Or you do stick your toe in and it seems a little bit cold, and you wonder, “Can I stand it?” You’re not really going to know until you jump in. So learn to look with some suspicion at your hindrances. Recognize them as hindrances, and learn how not to side with them. Remind yourself that they can blind you and narrow your vision. One detail seems important, because this can be the case with sensual desire, this can be the case with anger. So when you learn how to be suspicious of your hindrances, it gets a lot easier to say, “I don’t really want to go there.” And then our mind is more inclined to want to come back and stay with the breath. Think of the breath as being comfortable. What kind of rhythm would feel good right now? And when it is comfortable, how can you maintain that sense of comfort? Because sometimes the needs of the body will change. What feels comfortable for a while may not feel so comfortable after a while. And if you’re not paying attention, you get mechanical in your breathing. It becomes irritating, and the mind will want to go someplace else. So each time you breathe in, ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel gratifying right now, anywhere in the body?” Then when you’ve got a rhythm that does feel good, think of that sense of ease and well-being spreading through the body, down the spine, out the legs, down the front of the body, all through the head. Think of the breath coming in and out not only through the nose but also through the eyes and the ears. In from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, going deep into the brain. This way you combine the two qualities of alertness and ardency. Because it’s ardency that makes alertness skillful. It’s what makes mindfulness skillful. Mindfulness, you remember, means keeping something in mind. You can keep all kinds of things in mind. The question is what’s useful right now. You try to focus on keeping in mind the things that really are relevant. The same with alertness. You can be alert to anything. The sound of the mouse. It looks like we’ve got a mouse in the cellar. The sound of the crickets. Whatever thoughts are coming through your mind. They’re all in the present moment. But we’re not here just to be in the present moment. We’re here to notice, “What are we doing in the present moment?” Because, after all, that relates to the Four Noble Truths. We suffer because of things we’re doing. When are we doing them? We’re doing them right now. So you want to be here and focus on your actions. That’s what alertness is all about. So you make the effort to keep the focus on your actions. That effort is part of the ardency that makes the mindfulness and the alertness skillful. So this is what you’re doing right here, working on right mindfulness. And staying with the breath, anupasana, following it, watching it, as consistently as you can. Because we are here to see cause and effect, to watch our actions and look for the results of our actions. And you see them only when you hear them consistently. It’s like those old-fashioned vinyl records where they have a needle that goes through a groove. If the needle just hops around, you can’t make sense of anything that’s on the groove. But if it just stays consistently in the groove, things make sense. So stay here consistently. You get to see the mind in action. You get to see the results of its actions. And from there you can adjust, get a sense of what’s skillful and what’s not, what leads to suffering, what leads to awareness. And as the mind stays more consistently here, the concentration develops. You stay with one object. That’s what concentration means. It doesn’t mean focusing intently too much. It means being consistently with something, having intention and sticking with that intention. Intention is to stay with the breath in a way that keeps the mind alert. So, anupasana. Follow the breath. Watch it. Watch the mind in relation to the breath. Watch the feelings in relation to the breath. We read the description of right mindfulness and it sounds like there are four different activities you can do. They’re all here in one. You stick with the breath, you’ve got feelings, you’ve got the mind state, you’ve got skillful and unskillful qualities of mind. Those are all the four frames of reference. They’re all right here. So you’re in the right place. Now learn how to stay here with a sense of well-being.

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