The Sixteen Steps

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The instructions for Right Mindfulness describe two activities. One is keeping track of something, like the body in and of itself, feelings, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves. And then putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, you’re trying to maintain your focus on one topic. Make sure other topics don’t come in and invade. This is basically instructions on how to get the mind into concentration. The most detailed instructions on Right Mindfulness and how to get into concentration are contained in the Buddha’s instructions on breath, mindfulness, dhana, pana, siddhi. They come in sixteen steps. And there’s a temptation to think you just go from one, two, three, four, five, six, all the way through sixteen. But the Buddha doesn’t explain them that way. He divides them up into four tetrads. In each tetrad, he says, on its own it’s capable of getting you to develop the factors for awakening, and from there to clear knowledge and release. Each of the tetrads is related to one of the establishings of mindfulness, or the frames of reference. When you look at the different frames, you realize that they’re all here right now. One frame is the body, i.e., the breath. The other frame is feelings. Well, the feelings are right there with the breath. The third is the mind. You’ve got your mind focused on the breath. So ideally, you have all three there together. The fourth frame, the Buddha tends to relate to the activity of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Let’s focus first on the first three. As the Buddha says, you maintain alertness with the breath. It gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. So the mental activity of the mind, focused on the body, i.e., the breath, gives rise to the feeling. So ideally, you’ve got all three at once. The problem comes when things do not settle down. This is where it’s good to divide things out. In terms of the breath, the Buddha says, “Notice when the breath is short and notice when it’s long.” Breathe in and out, aware of the entire body, and then breathe, calming bodily fabrications. Bodily fabrications is a technical term for the breath. You may wonder why the Buddha uses a technical term. Well, he’s trying to get you sensitive to the process of fabrication. He’s trying to get you to think in terms of insight, seeing things as fabrication, as the result of fabrication. And bodily fabrication is one of the main ones that shapes your experience. So if you’re having trouble settling down, ask yourself, “Is the breath too long? Is the breath too short?” And John Lee recommends asking other questions as well. “Is it too heavy? Is it too light? Is it too fast? Is it too slow?” And can you be aware of the whole body breathing in and the whole body breathing out? The image the Buddha gives is of a turner, someone like a lathe worker. Only in those days they didn’t have automatic lathes like we do. I’ve seen videos of old-fashioned turners. On the one hand, they’re focused on the spot where the blade meets the wood that’s going to be turned. But on the other hand, and literally the other hand, is pulling a bow back and forth. The bow is attached to a string. The string wraps around the piece of wood being turned. And unlike a modern lathe, which you just turn on or off, the turning of the piece of wood is quite a delicate part of the process. Sometimes the turner makes a short turn, sometimes a long turn. Turns at different angles, different speeds. So the turner has to be sensitive all around. So on the one hand, you’re focused on whatever spots in the body are sensitive to how the breathing feels. And on the other, you’re trying to be aware of the whole body, because you want to take those feelings of pleasure and spread them throughout the body. As Buddha said, that’s how you get the mind into right concentration. This is where he uses a different analogy. The bathman mixes water in with bath powder. Back in those days, they didn’t have soap. They would make a kind of dough out of a powder, mixing it with water. And the ideal bathman would mix the water in such a way that everything in the dough was moistened, but the water wouldn’t drip out. In the same way, you try to work the pleasure, work the sense of well-being, through the body. Whenever there’s tension or tightness, think of it relaxing. Whenever there’s a sense of blockage, think of the pleasure going right through. In this way, the mind can settle down. So you’ve got several of the steps all together right there. You’ve got the mind gladdened, you’ve got the mind steadied or concentrated. You’ve liberated it from its thoughts of the world outside. You’ve got that sense of pleasure, rapture, filling the body. You know when the breath is long, you know when it’s short, and you’re aware of the whole body. So you’ve got several of those steps from different tetrads all at once. And when things fit together like this, you don’t have to think about which step is in which order or which tetrad it belongs to. They’re all here together. The dividing out is more useful when things are not settling down. The question is, is it the problem with the body? Is it with the feeling? Is it with the mind? Or are you distracted by something outside? This is where the tetrads are useful. You can do a sort of checklist. Are you aware of the short or longer breathing? Are there other variations in the breathing? Are you fully aware of the body? Is there a blockage someplace? What can be done about it? As for feelings, where are you most sensitive? Because sometimes it’s very easy to get mechanical about the breathing. You’ve had a spot where you’ve focused mostly in the past, and after a while it gets kind of dull. Don’t try other spots. See what is more sensitive right now. Where there’s a feeling of lack in the bodily energy, what way of breathing would give rise to a sense of fullness or rapture? What way of breathing would give rise to a sense of pleasure? And what are the perceptions you’re holding in mind? Because the perceptions play a big role. They’re the third step in that second tetrad. They’re essential to mental fabrication. And the big mental fabrications here are your perceptions. Do you perceive the breath simply as air coming in and out through the nose? Do you see it as an energy running through the body? If so, how does that energy run? Does it run up? Does it run down? Sometimes when you breathe in, there’s this tendency to pull the energy up. This is what develops what’s called zen sickness, where the energy gathers in your head and feels locked there. You can counteract that by thinking of the energy going down. A Zen monk, Hakuin, had an image of a big ball of butter sitting on top of his head and then thinking of it melting, melting, melting, as he breathed in, as he breathed out, melting down his body to bring the energy back down. That’s one perception you can hold. You can try the perception of a sponge. Your whole body is a sponge. It’s not limited to any one spot or any two spots. You’ve got pores all over your skin. Breath energy can come in and out there. That’s a question of where you perceive the center of the energy. Because the energy itself is not coming in from outside. The air is coming in from the outside. And there are times when you do feel energy coming in from the outside, but there’s also the source of energy inside. Which do you want to focus on when that energy inside begins to expand? How does it expand? Does it expand from one spot? Does it expand from many spots all at once? What way of perceiving the breath is most energizing? When you need to be energized. What way is most calming? When you need to be calmed. These are questions related to the second tetrad. As for the third tetrad, the first step is to be simply aware of the mind. And if the mind is the problem, you ask yourself, “Okay, what is the mind preoccupied with? What kind of mood is it in right now? Does it have too little energy, too much energy? Does it feel in the mood to meditate or not? If it’s not in the mood, what can you do to make it want to meditate?” That’s called gladdening the mind. And what would gladden your mind right now? If you’re tired of focusing on one spot, you can focus on two. I knew an old schoolteacher who, after retiring, had gone to live in Watasokanam. There was another woman who was quite psychic and she could read people’s meditation. And she noted that the schoolteacher, as soon as she was checking up on everybody else, lost concentration. She wanted to know why she was so fast. And the schoolteacher said, “Well, I think of two points all at once. One point in the middle of my head, one point at the base of my spine. It’s like connecting a wire between a light bulb and a battery. When the wire is connected, things light up. So if you feel restricted by one spot, take two. And you can choose any two spots. And draw a line between them. And see if that’s transfixing. See if that’s entertaining. If you’re getting sluggish, you can move your spot around. I’ve had times when I’ve been really sleepy, when I was looking after Jon Furon many hours of the night. And I found the best way to stay awake was to focus on one spot for three breaths, then another spot for three breaths, then another spot. Let the mind travel around and see what’s happening. Be mindful of what it’s doing, and that wakes it up. If you can’t gladden the mind with a breath, you can use other topics for the time being. Recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, the Sangha, your own virtue, your own generosity, the fact that you’re developing the qualities that make people into devas, that can be gladdening. Or, if the mind already has too much energy, you can think more about getting it more concentrated. You can think about death for a bit. Death could come at any time. The question is, are you ready to go? Or are there any attachments you would have that would make it difficult to let go and just say,”Okay, I’m heading off”? Work on those attachments. Realize that your time is precious, and you don’t know how much time you’ve got. So make the most of what you’ve got right here, right now, the opportunity to clean things out of the mind. The fourth step in that tetrad is to liberate the mind. This usually has to do with putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, which is that fourth tetrad. The Buddha describes this as breathing in and out, aware of inconstancy, breathing in and out, aware of dispassion, aware of cessation, aware of letting go. It’s a very shorthand series of terms for realizing that whatever it is that’s going to pull you away is inconstant. In other words, it’s unreliable, stressful in itself, not worth it. But at the same time, if you want that perception to be worthwhile, you also have to say, “What’s the allure? What is it that’s pulling you out? Is it an attraction for something? Or is it something else?” Because sometimes you’re pulled to things that you don’t really feel attracted to, but you have a sense of obligation. What’s the obligation? And you see that it’s really not worth going for, not worth churning out thoughts, because that’s what’s happening. You are the one churning out the thoughts. Think of the Buddha’s instructions. Actually, sorry, Buddha’s instructions on dealing with sounds you hear. People say nasty things and they reverberate around your mind. But what they said is not reverberating. It’s your own discussion of what they said. You’re the one who’s doing all the work. You’re the one creating all that trouble. Is it worth it? Just let the sound stop with the sound. And the further discussion is something you’re using your energy to create. Why are you doing that? When you see that you’re the one creating the trouble, and you don’t have to, that’s when you let go. Then you let go. It stops, because you’re the one creating it. It’s like watching a TV show and realizing you’re not simply watching it. You’re the one that’s creating the show. And it’s a bad show. The acting is horrible. The storylines are pretty mundane, pretty tiresome. It’s not worth it. And that’s when you let go. So that’s how the four different tetrads interpenetrate and work together. You don’t do one, two, three, four, five. You use which tetrad or whichever step is necessary right now. When things are coming together, appreciate the fact that they’re all together. When you want things to develop, to get better, ask yourself, “What could be improved? Is it in the area of the breath? Is it in the area of the feelings? Is it in the area of the mind?” Is there still something out there in the world that you’re feeling attached to? Then you use the different tetrads to analyze the problem, to give you some ideas of what to do. When things are going well, you just put everything together. All these four things become one. When I was in France last year, there was someone complaining about four things all at once. Why do I have to think of four things? You think of only one thing. You think of the breath. You’re making the breath comfortable. It’s not too much. You’re just staying there, being aware right there. It’s only when things are not going well that you have to sort things out, spread out the spreadsheet here, and see which step is going to be helpful. So, as Chonle says, they’re one and four, four and one. Make them four when you need to analyze the problem. Make them one when everything is going well. That way you don’t have to worry about completing all sixteen steps in one night. When things come together, they’re all right there.

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