Survey Your Mind

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The jhans in Thailand often begin their meditation instructions by saying to take a survey of your mind. In which way is it leaning right now? Is it leaning towards the past? Toward the future? Is it leaning toward things you like or things you don’t like? You’ve got to get the mind upright. Sometimes you can simply focus on the breath, and the mind is content to be with it. Other times it’s not. It’s got other preoccupations. This is one of the reasons why we normally have chanting before the evening meditation. It gives you some good things to think about, to get you in the mood to meditate. Think about the triple gem, the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. What that means for you means you live in a world where someone has found the way to the end of suffering, has taught that way, and set up a monastic order to keep that way alive. The Buddha talks about how, as he left the world, he left behind monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, who were all competent to teach the Dhamma. But he placed his main hopes with the Sangha. And even with the Sangha, we look at history. There’s been a tradition where you have a couple of generations where the practice thrives, and then it gets so well-supported that it falls apart. That’s the big irony. People are inspired by the monks, and so they give lots of material support, and that attracts a lot of the wrong people. But then there are those who go out into the forest and really dedicate themselves to practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma and the rules of the monastic order, the traditions of the monastic order, and create a vessel for this constant renewal to happen. So the Buddha foresaw that, and he looked at his life and the amount of time he had to spend talking to people about things that really shouldn’t have to be talked about. There’s the case of the brahmin who didn’t like to wipe himself after he went to the bathroom. The Buddha had to establish a rule for that. Sure, that’s not the kind of thing he wanted to talk about, but that’s what he had to do. That’s how he established the Dhamma, in great detail, from the big picture. The principles on down to the little details. We live in a world where that tradition is still alive. The fashions of the day come and go. But the basic principles of the Dhamma are always true. That’s another thing to give us confidence. What the Buddha had to say about greed, aversion, and delusion 2,600 years ago is still true now. What he had to say about the no-bladeful path is still true. No one’s found that any of the factors of the path are unnecessary or that there need to be other factors. As he said, there was nothing lacking in the Dhamma. There’s nothing superfluous. So there are lots of ways you can think about the fact that we live in a world where the Dhamma is still alive, where there was a Buddha who found it, who made all the sacrifices necessary to found it, and to establish it in such a way that it’s still alive. And the Dhamma promises a lot, that we can, through our efforts, put an end to suffering. We can train ourselves. So it’s good that we take time to do this. The more time, the better. Because can you think of anything else that’s more worthy? The skill of putting an end to suffering. And as you put an end to your own suffering, you find that you’re placing less and less of a burden on the world until you finally get to the point where the Buddha says you have no more debts to the world around you. So we take joy in that fact. And as we reflect on it, it helps put a lot of our issues of the day into perspective. Because all too often we come to the meditation straight from the issues of the day. And it’s not the case that we can just drop them at the door or drop them as you sit down to meditate. They’re still lurking there in the mind. So it’s good to have something to put perspective into the mind so you can see that these things are really minor and not worthy of distracting you from giving yourself fully to the meditation. And so the mind is leading to things it likes and things it doesn’t like. The big issue, of course, that we like is sensuality. It’s our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. And it’s good to see that that’s not worth our time. There’s a better way to look for happiness. For the most part, that’s our way of avoiding boredom, avoiding a sense of dis-ease inside. It’s thinking about the sensual pleasures we’d like. We can spend hours working over the variations, but there’s not much. Sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. With less, there’s not that much variety. Then we can work on the variations again and again, but nothing gets accomplished. It’s a huge waste of time. As the Buddha said, when we suffer from household distress, the cure is not to go for household joy. Household joy is trying to find ideas, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, that you like, to replace the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas you don’t like. But looking for relief in that way is pretty futile, because the things you like are going to end and you’re going to go back to the things you don’t like. It goes over and over and over again. The best cure for household distress is renunciate distress. In other words, realizing that there is a way out, but you haven’t gotten there yet. Learn how to live with that fact. Make the most of it. It plays a huge role in motivating yourself to practice. We’re often told that we shouldn’t have goals, that having goals makes us miserable, that we shouldn’t have any desire to change things for what they are, because that’s going to make us miserable. The Buddha never taught that. He said, “Let yourself be distressed by the fact that you haven’t attained the goal, but don’t just sit there with the distress. Use that as a motivation to practice.” So you can experience renunciate joy, the joy that comes when you realize you’ve dropped some of your defilements. The mind is a lot lighter. The mind is a lot more spacious. This is the kind of joy that has a future. It goes someplace, and when it arrives, it stays. It doesn’t change. That’s why things you don’t like in the world, the people who upset you, this is why the Buddha recommends that you extend lots of goodwill. This is one of the reasons why in the evening chants we end with a prayer of Brahma Varas. Realizing that we all want happiness, it’s just that a lot of us are really deluded in our happiness. Goodwill is basically the wish that people would understand the true causes for happiness and be willing and able to act on them. One of the big issues with goodwill, of course, is the question of who deserves it. It’s not a question of deserving. You deserve your goodwill in the sense that it’s going to be good for you, to ensure that your engagement with other people is always based on good intentions. Because this is how we learn. If you know that something is going to cause harm and then you actually cause the harm, you don’t learn anything. It’s when you start with good intentions and then realize, “Okay, they’re not good enough.” That’s when you learn. You ask yourself, “What’s still lacking? I thought I was going to do something that was going to be harmless, but it turned out not to be the case. What didn’t I see? What didn’t I foresee?” This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you talk things over with someone who’s more advanced on the path, when you find that you’ve made a mistake like that. But we start with goodwill. That’s how we learn. That’s how you take care of your needs. If you want to find happiness, you can’t wish ill on anybody. Then the goodwill expands into compassion and empathetic joy. When you see that there are beings who are suffering, you feel compassion for them because of your goodwill. When you see those who are happy, your goodwill should let you be happy for them. In fact, this is a really good test. If you find that there are people who are doing well in one way or another that make you jealous, you feel that you’re in competition with them. There’s something lacking in your goodwill, something that’s not quite right. And learning how to be happy for others, as Jon Fung used to say, is a really inexpensive way of getting a share of their happiness. Then finally there’s equanimity, realizing that however much you may want beings to be happy, it’s going to depend on their actions. The same applies to you. It’s going to depend on your actions. When you think about that, it gives you more and more motivation to want to practice. So these are some of the ways you can get the mind into the mood to practice. We talk a lot about applying direct thought and evaluation to the breath. Well, you have to apply it to the mind as well. It’s like fitting two pieces of wood together. Sometimes you have to sand one piece of wood so they fit. Other times you have to sand the other piece of wood. And you look over them again and again and again until they finally fit together nicely. That’s when you can really settle down. So make a survey. Look at your breath, look at the mind, and see what needs to be sanded down. And then the meditation is going to go a lot better. you

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