Five Steps to Insight

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When you try to get the mind to settle down, you’re doing two things. One is to keep the object of your meditation in mind. In this case, it’s the breath. Each time you breathe in, try to remember this is where you want to be. The second thing is putting aside any interest in things outside. Thoughts may come up about this, that, or the other thing. You have to regard them as the result of past karma. You’re just going to ignore them. There will come a point in the meditation where you try to understand why the mind comes up with these thoughts, but for the meantime, just think, “I’m not going to get involved. That’s not any of my business.” In some cases, they’ll go away. In other cases, they’ll hang around for a while before they go away. It’s like stray dogs coming to your house. If you don’t feed them, some of them will go away immediately. Others will hang around in hopes that maybe you might change your mind. So don’t let any stray dogs into the house. You don’t have to chase them away. Just be right here with the breath. Make the breath as comfortable as you can, as interesting as you can. Because sometimes the mind isn’t satisfied with comfort. It wants something more. It wants to understand. So in this case, you try to understand. Where does the in-breath start? Where is the impulse that gets it started? And how do you know when the breath is too long or too short? And when the breath gets comfortable, what can you do to maintain that sense of well-being? And how do you spread it around? The process of breathing. But the important thing is you find that it engages your mind. That you’re not just forcing it to be here, but you find it interesting and enjoyable. A good place to stay. Because ultimately, there will be work that you have to do. So it’s good to feel at home here, that this is a place you want to stay, settle in. Because on the one hand, you’ll want to understand the things that pull you away from the concentration. What is there allure? In some cases, you simply drift off from lack of mindfulness. Other times, a thought comes up and you say, “Well, this looks interesting. It’s like a little present that’s been sent your way.” And you want to look inside, see what’s inside the present. Too often, it’s nothing much. It’s all in the wrapping. So what is there about the wrapping that has you deceived? Often, it’s not so much the wrapping itself, but the mind itself is looking for diversion, looking for something new, something fun. And as you look into this process of distraction, you find you learn a lot of things about the mind. And you learn about them with your steps, through mindfulness and through discernment. The Buddha himself makes the comparison. He says it’s like a dam. Mindfulness is the dam that stops things. In other words, you remind yourself you don’t want to go with that thought. And discernment is what takes it apart. And so you may want to look into it. When this distracting thought arises, exactly how has it come? What causes it? And you find that as you keep on trying to keep the mind in concentration, being mindful not to go with these thoughts, you begin to sense sooner and sooner what the process is, what’s going on. There are many steps, and you begin to see earlier and earlier steps, until you get to the point where it’s just a stirring of energy on the border between what’s physical and mental. It’s hard to say that it’s a physical energy or mental energy, but there’s an energy there. And if you decide, hey, this is a thought about X, you slap a little perception on it, you slap a label on it, and then it begins to grow. So you have to ask yourself, why are you slapping labels on these things? What are you looking for? That’s called the origination. Then there’s passing away. When you lose interest in the thought, it drops. But as long as you find that there’s some reason for it to hang around, you pick it up again. But try to notice those moments when the mind drops a thought, and then it’s decision to pick it up again. Sometimes it’s based on the hormones in the body. Say you have an angry thought, and the hormones go rushing through your blood system, and then the thought drops away, because after all it is something fabricated. It’s inconstant, stressful, not self. So it’ll go away. But you still feel the impact of those hormones in your body. So something inside you tells you, well, I must still be angry. You pick it up again. There’s that voice in the mind that says, your feelings are your real, the real ways you think about things. Sometimes people even say that your body has this wisdom. The body doesn’t know much of anything at all. What you’re dealing with is different levels of the mind. And if they’re in ignorance, you can’t say they’re wise. So you look at it, why does someone pick these things up again? What’s the allure? What’s the appeal? Sometimes with anger you tell yourself, well, I can show my power over other people. By being angry I get things done the way I want them to be done. We’re afraid that if you don’t express your anger, it’ll get bottled up and turn into a disease in the body. This is one of the reasons why we have the meditation skill, to remind yourself there is an alternative. You don’t have to express your anger outside, but you don’t have to bottle it up either. You can breathe right through the tension around the anger and it goes away. The anger may still be there in the mind, but at least the physical side is not unhealthy. You’ve actually got it on your side. When the anger doesn’t have any power over your body, then you can look at it more objectively and realize that it has its drawbacks. Because when you’re angry, you jump at whatever thought comes into the mind, you think that’s an inspired thought, you run with it. In other words, you have no sense of shame, no sense of compunction. Anything can pop into the mind and it comes right out. You feel that if you have the right to be angry, then you have the right to say whatever you want. Then you’re going to regret it afterwards. So you’re thinking about the drawbacks of whatever that was, whatever the emotion is, whatever the distraction is. And do you see that they really outweigh the allure? Because the allure is nothing much. But we have a tendency to dress it up. When you can undress it and see that it’s just the mind being stupid, the mind being ornery, the mind being stubborn, for what purpose? You get to the point where you say this is not worth it. Then you let it go. These are the five steps that constitute insight. It’s a teaching that the Buddha stresses many, many times throughout the Canon and it’s amazing how little emphasis people put on it nowadays. But this is how you gain discernment around the things that are harassing your mind, the things that are keeping it from being at peace, calm, stable inside. And this way your concentration grows deeper because it becomes more and more resilient. You get quicker and quicker. It’s seeing through the things that would pull you away. Until it feels like concentration is the normal state of the mind. So you learn how to enjoy it. But then you begin to realize it has its drawbacks too. This is where you apply the same analysis. When concentration arises, what’s its origination? How does it pass away? That’s not the big issue. The big issue is what’s the allure? Because you realize that as you maintain the concentration, this is one of the drawbacks and you have to keep at it. There’s no point where you can totally let go. At least not in the concentration and not have to do anything at all. This is the point where the mind gets more and more inclined to think that maybe what the Buddha taught about Nibbana, maybe what he taught about the Deathless really is a good thing. Wouldn’t it be good to have peace and happiness inside and not have to keep worrying about the causes? It’s like wanting to have a house where you don’t have to worry about repairs. As you’re getting your mind more and more used to concentration, it’s like you’ve been in a lousy house and you’ve got a nice big new house. Lots of conveniences, lots of comforts you didn’t have in the old house. And for a while you enjoy the comforts of this house. But ultimately you realize that this house too has to be kept up. And sometimes the more fancy objects you have, the more electronic objects you have, the more difficult they upkeep. That doesn’t mean you leave concentration and go back to your normal state. You want to go to something that’s even more refined, something even more stable, something more reliable. That’s when the mind inclines to either stay in concentration or go anyplace else. And it’s that neither here nor there when that opens up in the mind. That’s when you encounter something else entirely. What the Buddha says is unfabricated. In other words, it’s nothing you made up, nothing you have to create, and also nothing you have to maintain. And you realize that the Buddha was right. This is the ultimate happiness. So that’s the process of developing insight as the mind settles down. It’s not that you do concentration practice and then drop the concentration and then do insight practice. You do the two of them together and you gain your insight in the practice of putting away distractions, understanding them, taking them apart. And then as the mind settles down, more and more then you start taking apart the concentration, understanding. It’s allurious what its drawbacks are and how you can go beyond it by developing the dispassion that comes from seeing that the drawbacks outweigh the advantages and that there is something better. So the path the Buddha taught is nothing mysterious. It’s the same principle all the way through. It’s just that it gets more and more refined as you get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing as you try to follow the path. It’s like any skill. At first you’re happy you’re able to just do the skill at all. But then you get so that you want to do it in more and more refined ways. You get more sensitive to the things that get in the way of doing it really smoothly, really gracefully, doing it really well. The difference here is that there’s a higher skill that helps get you past the skills of concentration and mindfulness and even discernment. You drop the discernment at the point of full awakening. But in the meantime you make use of these things so you don’t have to look anywhere else. That’s not the case that you say well we’ll do Samatha for X number of hours and X number of days and then do insight. You’re doing the two of them together. It’s just that you’re getting more and more sensitive to what you’re doing and you’re learning to ask the right questions and to look very carefully so you can get the real answers.

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