Judging Mindfulness & Concentration

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When the Buddha describes mindfulness practice, he describes two activities. The first is keeping focused on one topic, like the breath in and of itself. You’re not worried about the breath in relationship to the world outside, just the breath that you experience indirectly, right here, right now. Where do you experience it? Where do you feel it when it comes in, when it goes out? Stay right there with it. Sometimes we talk about keeping watch over the breath. It’s more an aspect of feeling the breath. The breath is something you wear. You can feel it anywhere in the body. The other activity is putting aside greed or distress with reference to the world. What that means is any thoughts about the world, what you want out of it, or what you’re disappointed in the world about, just put them aside. Don’t let them come barging in right now. Now the qualities of mind that you bring to these two activities are three. The first is mindfulness itself, which means keeping something in mind, like keeping the breath in mind, but you’re also keeping in mind the fact that you’ve got to put aside any thoughts that would pull you away. You’re making a value judgment. There are certain thoughts you want to stay with, thoughts about the breath, and certain thoughts you’ve got to put aside. Sometimes you hear people saying that Buddhist meditation is all about having no value judgments, but how can anybody live without value judgments? We’re constantly deciding what’s worth doing, what’s not worth doing. That’s how we function. So here the basic rule is, any thoughts that are related to the breath, getting the mind to settle down with the breath, those are good thoughts. Encourage them. Any thoughts that would pull you away someplace else right now, discourage them. Keep that in mind. Of course you’re not just keeping things in mind, you’re actually alert to what you’re doing. That’s the second quality. It means you know how the breath is, you know how the mind is, you know whether they’re staying together. Then the third quality comes in. Ardency. You’re trying to do this well. This is the intentional part of the practice. It’s what makes right mindfulness right mindfulness. Right alertness, right alertness. You can keep all kinds of things in mind. You can be alert to all kinds of things in the present moment. But if you want to do this well, you have to keep in mind things that are related to staying with the breath and putting other things aside. And be alert to what you’re doing. Ardency is what tells you when the mind has wandered away from the breath, you’re going to bring it right back. You’re not going to stay. You’re not going to stop to sniff the flowers, look at the birds. You’ve got work to do here. But it’s good work. Work in understanding your own mind. Trying to find out how the mind lies to itself, how it is ignorant of what it’s doing. That should be really fascinating. Once you are with the breath, trying to figure out how can I make the breath as comfortable as possible. And here you can try different rhythms of breathing. Fast, slow, heavy, light. Long or short, deep or shallow. You can experiment until you find something you like, and then you can stay with it until it doesn’t feel so good anymore. Because the needs of the body will change, especially as the mind begins to settle down. So you want to be on top of what the breath needs. And those qualities should help you stay with the breath. But if you wander off, again, they help you from wandering off all the way. They bring you back. Mindfulness, you remind yourself what you’re here for. Alertness, you try to catch yourself as you do wander off, and you’ll catch yourself faster and faster. All too often we’ve wandered away for a while and thoroughly settled in in another thought world and realized that this is not where we’re supposed to be. But you don’t want to have to wait that long. You want to get more sensitive to the signs that a thought world is about to form. And just breathe right through it. The faster you can do that, the more interesting things you’ll find about, as I said, how the mind lies to itself. How it does something and then presents it didn’t do it. Or denies that it did it. Or forgets. Or is just not really paying attention. You’re doing things on automatic pilot. You want to catch these things faster and faster so you can see what’s going on clearly. As the Buddha said, you want to get to the point where you think the thoughts you want to think, and you don’t think the thoughts you don’t want to think. And you get a better idea of what really is worth thinking about. So that’s how you get the mind to settle down. You’ve got to be alert both to the thoughts that are related to the breath and any tendency to wander off. Bring the mind right back. Bring the mind right back. And when you come back, reward the mind. Breathe in a way that feels really good, really satisfying. As I said, you’re trying to develop a sense of well-being in the body so the mind can settle down. Of course, you try to bring a good attitude so you can give rise to that sense of well-being in the body. So it’s, you’re developing pleasure in the body through pleasure in the mind. And then pleasure in the mind through pleasure in the body. They help each other along. As you do this consistently, the mind is going to get into concentration. Sometimes we’re told that mindfulness practice is one thing, you’re alert to what’s going on in the present moment without trying to change anything. With concentration practice, they say you try to change things so the mind gets fairly narrowly focused, to the point where it’s not really aware of things going on outside at all. If you’re taught concentration like that, his images for concentration are full body awareness. You’ll learn pleasure and even rapturous breath throughout the whole body. In the same way that when there’s a spring in the bottom of a lake, the water comes up and it permeates the whole lake. When lotuses are sitting in a still lake of water, places that haven’t risen up above the water are saturated with water from their roots to their tips. Or a man sitting with a cloth wrapped all around his body. It’s an image for awareness all around your body. That’s the kind of quality we’re working for. This takes us into what’s called the second stage of mindfulness practice, which the Buddha talks about, discerning origination with regard to the breath, discerning passing away, inside and outside. Origination doesn’t mean just plain old arising, it means causation. You’re trying to discover what causes what. And the only way you can do that is by messing with things. In other words, trying this, trying that, experimenting. That’s how scientists figure things out. You don’t just sit there and watch what’s happening on a table, say. Say you’ve got some rabbits, and just let the rabbits hop around on their own. You’re trying to figure out what makes the rabbits hop. You’ve got to change things. Sometimes you have to hide the food, see how intelligent the rabbits are in finding the food. Sometimes you raise the temperature in the room, see how they react to that. Sometimes you lower the temperature. In other words, you have to play around if you’re going to learn things, especially learn causation. You notice that when two things happen together, they happen together because one causes the other, and it’s not just a coincidence. That requires experimentation. So to understand origination of the mind, it’s not just watching things arise, it’s trying to figure out what’s causing what. And you do that by trying to get the mind deeper. deeper into concentration. As we’re contemplating internally and externally, it means basically realizing that whatever you’re experiencing in the breath, other people experience the same sort of thing. Wherever you go, whatever you might be reborn as, you’d still have these same things over and over again. And what he uses is that reflection sometimes to give rise to a sense of sanghvega. If you don’t really do the work, you’re going to have to come back again and again and again, and there’s no guarantee that it’s going to get easier. So it’s not that you’re listening to the person who’s breathing right next to you, it’s more reflecting on what you could be. Realizing it’s all the same kind of stuff. If you have pains in your body now, wherever you go, you’re going to find the same sort of pains. Mental difficulties, wherever you go, they’ll be the same sort of difficulties. There’s always aging, illness, and death. In all lifetimes, even up in the heavenly realms, they have death as well. You reflect internally and externally like this to get a sense of sanghvega, so that you really do want to get out of here. Primarily your interest is right here. And again, you’re passing judgment. Without judgment, you wouldn’t know what’s causing what, or what would be a valid experiment to figure out what causes what. So using your powers of judgment, but you’re learning to use them well. A lot of people are afraid of their powers of judgment. They’re afraid of the judging mind. That’s because the judging mind hasn’t been trained properly. You’re not going to get out until you train it. You’re not going to get the mind’s conversation with itself to be really helpful and enjoyable, unless you train it. This is how you do it. You learn how to pass judgment on simple things like this. How does the breath feel? Does it feel good enough? If not, what can you do? Make it better. What can you do to make the mind clearer to itself? Or get it really still? And then watch to see if a thought is going to form. There’s not that much difference really between thoughts and emotions. It’s just that emotions have a stronger impact on your experience of the body through the breath. So one way we can weaken unskillful emotions is to breathe properly. So again, you’re passing judgment, but you’re learning how to do it well. That’s what our powers of judgment, that’s how they’re best put to use. To figure out within yourself how the Buddha went about putting it into suffering. We read it in the books. We get some general ideas. That’s all you can get from the books is general ideas and a few techniques. But learning how to master the techniques, learning how to apply them, that’s going to require your own process of observation, commitment, reflection, more commitment, more reflection. And that’s how you find out how really good the Dharma can be.

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