Aware of Your Own Mind

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When you sit here with your eyes closed, you’re experiencing a part of the world that only you can experience—your body, your mind—as you sense them from inside. And it’s precisely about this area that the Buddha taught. The big problem, he said, in here is that the suffering and stress we cause ourselves. But the solution is also in here. The same mind that creates suffering can also be trained to stop the suffering. And the potentials for pain and suffering that we have in this part of the world can be turned into potentials for pleasure, potentials for well-being. This is why we train the mind and try to focus it in this area here. When we’re meditating, we’re not contemplating anything far away. We’re contemplating our breath. Again, the way you feel your breath is something no one else can do. As the Buddha pointed out, if you’re ignorant of the way you breathe, even that can become a cause of suffering. Because the breath, when it gets out of line, can be harsh, it can be uncomfortable for the body. And when it’s uncomfortable, you don’t want to stay here, you want to think about something else. You want to get out of this part of the world. And you escape into your thoughts and escape into a search for pleasures outside. And that tends to create even more suffering because you’re still ignorant about what’s going on inside. So we try to bring awareness here. Watch your breath. Try to watch it all the way in, all the way out. Try to make sure that there are no gaps in your awareness. Because once there’s a gap in your awareness, other thoughts will come in and take you out. So try to be aware of that process too, especially as you’re getting started. The mind is bound to wander. It’s used to wandering. And all of a sudden it’s hemmed in and has to stay right here inside the confines of your body, and it begins to resist. So it’ll try to find the slightest little opening to get away. Accept the fact that it’s going to happen, but don’t just sit there while it’s happening. As soon as you realize that thoughts have gone away, come right back. And try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable. Ask yourself what kind of breathing is good for the body right now. Long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light? What feels best for the body right now? When you’re feeling tired, you want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re feeling tense or wired, you want to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing and more soothing. So try to get a sense of what the body needs right now and see if you can breathe in a way that helps to provide for that need. Bring some awareness to your breathing. And bring some awareness to your thoughts. The Buddha said he got on the path to the end of suffering by dividing his thoughts into two kinds, based on the kinds of actions they led to. If they were going to lead to skillful actions, they were okay. If they were going to lead to unskillful actions, he put a stop to them. In other words, he didn’t look at his thoughts as to whether they were entertaining or not, or whether he liked them or not, but just the question, “Where will these thoughts lead?” Sometimes it’s hard to see that if the mind isn’t still, because the thoughts can lead in an unskillful direction, but that unskillful direction may look good to us because it looks better than what we’ve got. This is another reason why we try to create a sense of pleasure in the breath, so we’ve got something good. When you’ve got something good, then you can look at the things that will in the long term be problematic. “I don’t really need those. I’m better off where I am.” So put yourself in a good position right now. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing is good? Where in the body is it best to stay focused? Where is the breath clearest? Where is it most comfortable?” Try to focus there. And as you do get a sense of comfort from the breath, then the next question is, “How can I spread that sense of comfort?” Why does it have to be only one spot? Because when we talk about breath here, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s a flow of energy that goes through the body. The most obvious flow, of course, is the flow that brings the air in and lets the air out. But as you sit here with your eyes closed, you realize you know where your body is. That’s not just because you’re sitting against a chair or sitting on the floor. You could feel some kind of energy that lets you know where your arms are, where your legs are, where your torso is, where your head is. And all that gets classed as breath. So there are many levels of breath energy in the body. And you can think of the breath energy that brings the air in and goes out as melding with the other energies. So the body becomes one large, field of breath energy, moving in, moving out, moving around. And try to make your awareness large as well. Even though it’s centered in one spot, you can still be aware of different parts of the body. It’s like looking at a picture. You can focus on one spot in the picture, but you can also see the whole picture at the same time. And as the comfort spreads around, then it’s a lot easier to stay here. Then the mind will be less inclined to want to go someplace else. There will still be times when it does slip off, but if you’ve got a good place to come back to, you’ll be happy to come back. And no one is forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. When the breath is uncomfortable, you have every right to find a new way to breathe. Because the way you breathe is going to have an impact on how you sense the body. And as I said, if that impact is uncomfortable, the mind will want to slip off and want to stay here. And when it’s not here, then it can’t see the potentials here. It doesn’t understand how it’s creating self-suffering or what potentials it has for pleasure. The simple fact that you’ve got a breath here means there’s a potential for pleasure in the present moment. The simple fact that you’re thinking means that you can use your thinking in a way that leads to well-being. So you’ve got these potentials here, and the meditation is simply a matter of making the most of them. By bringing more and more awareness to this part of the world, to what you’re doing inside this part of the world as you breathe and as you think. So think about the breath. Be aware of the breath. Keep this up. The more continuous your awareness, the more you’ll see inside. It’s like listening to an old LP record. If the needle bounces around, you have no idea what’s on the record. It just screeches and scratches. But if the needle stays in the groove, you can hear the whole piece of music from beginning to end and understand what it’s all about. The same with your mind. The same with the breath. Stay with these things continually and you’ll begin to see the whole story. You’ll see where the mind has its unskillful thoughts, where it gets deluded by itself, where it fools itself, and where you can see through that. One of the ways the mind deludes itself is by telling itself, “I’m going to stay right here, and the next moment it’s off someplace else.” Think of your mind as like a committee. There are lots of different members in there, and some of the members are still not sure they want to meditate right now. So sometimes they make decisions, and then they’re quiet. They’re going to wait until you’re not really paying attention, and then they slip out. You want to see those early decisions and undo them. One good way of undoing them is to make the breath really, really comfortable. But the other, of course, is to be as continuous as you can in your awareness. Even though the mind may slip away, the more quickly you can catch it, the more you begin to understand how the mind has many layers inside, how the decisions get shunted around from one part of the mind to another, and the stages in what it means to be distracted. There’ll be a little stirring in the body. In the beginning, it’s hard to really say whether it’s a stirring in the body or a stirring in the mind, but there’s a little stirring in the energy. You look into it and say, “What’s this?” And then the mind will slap a label on it, “Oh, this is a thought about that,” or, “This is something happening in this part of the body.” It’ll decide whether it’s going to take it as a physical or a mental event. And then the question is, do you want to continue with this? Often the mind is bored with what it’s doing in the present moment and says, “Sure, let’s go.” If you can see those processes as they happen, that internal dialogue, you realize it’s going to go off in a bad direction or in any direction at all at the moment away from the breath, you can say, “No,” and put a stop to it. It’s when these things are happening in ignorance, when your attention is diverted someplace else, that they take over. So this is how we look after the health of the mind, by giving it a good place to stay in the present moment, giving it a sense of well-being, giving it a task that enables it to understand itself so that this part of the world, which is your part of the world, is not a mystery to you. This is one of the big ironies in life. It’s the part of the world that is exclusive to us, which is really ours and nobody else’s. It’s like those old maps where they had huge blank spaces. We know about the world outside, but our own worlds are a mystery to us. So what we’re trying to do as we meditate is clear up the mystery. And as we clear up the mystery, we also clear up the causes for suffering inside, the ways the mind creates unnecessary stress and strain for itself, unnecessary problems for itself. So bring as much awareness to this part of your world as you can, because there are a lot of potentials here—potentials for suffering, potentials for pleasure, potentials for really solid well-being. It’s all right here. It’s simply a matter of looking continually and knowing how to look in a way that maximizes the good pleasures and sees right through the bad ones. And when we solve the problems in here, then the problems outside are not going to weigh on us at all. It’s our tendency to take problems outside and bring them in and carry them around inside. That’s why we suffer. The things outside don’t make us suffer. We create a bridge and bring them in. What if we learn how not to create the bridge? Then things can be bad outside, but inside doesn’t have to be bad. That’s not like we’re running away from our problems. We can still deal with the problems, but they don’t have to be bad. We don’t weigh the mind down, because we don’t use them to weigh the mind down. The issue is what we’ve been doing all along—dealing with our mind, dealing with our sense of the body inside, out of ignorance. But that ignorance can be cleared away with knowledge. It’s like darkness. The darkness may have been there for aeons and aeons, and you bring a light into the darkness. The darkness doesn’t have the right to say, “We’ve been here so long, this is our place.” Once the light is there, the darkness disappears.

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