There’s Work to Be Done

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Try to keep your mind with the breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then the next, and then the next. Each breath as it comes in goes out. Make the breath interesting by asking yourself what kind of breath is comfortable. What kind of breath does the body need right now? Short, fast, slow, heavy, light, in-long, out-short, in-short, out-long? Experiment for a while to see what combinations of breathing feel good right now. Relaxing if you’re feeling tense, energizing if you’re feeling tired. Take advantage of the fact that you’ve got the breath that can be adjusted like this and it can have a good or a bad influence on the body. It can have a good or a bad influence on the mind. That’s why we’re focusing on the breath. We’re not here just to get the breath. We’re here to train the mind so we can find true happiness. But you can’t focus on the true happiness. You focus on the causes. That was the whole point of that Buddha’s first teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Suffering is a problem we don’t like. But if you’re going to solve the problem, you have to look for the cause. Sometimes it may not be where you thought it was. As for the goal at the end of the path, you can’t clone the goal. You can’t tell yourself. You read that awakened people are without any hunger. They’re totally equanimous, perfectly content. You can’t clone the goal. You can’t say, “I’ll just make myself totally without hunger and perfectly equanimous and perfectly content.” The hunger gets to you. As long as the hunger is still there, you’ve got to deal directly with it. This is why the Buddha’s approach is strategic. We can’t simply clone the goal that we want. We have to turn around and look at the causes for the problem, find the problem to begin with. We want happiness, but the Buddha says you’ve got to focus on the problem of suffering if you want true happiness. So we don’t focus immediately on where we want to go. We focus on the things that are getting in the way. And even with suffering, you have to figure out where the cause is. You go into a house and you find that the house is filled with smoke and you’re blinded by the smoke. You can’t say, “The problem is with my eyes.” The problem isn’t even with the smoke. The cause of the problem is the fire. You’ve got to find the fire. But at the fire, if the smoke goes away, your eyes will be okay. So even though there may be pain in one part of the mind, you’ve got to focus someplace else sometimes. This is the strategic aspect of the Buddha’s teachings. And they’re very active teachings as well, to get to that place of perfect contentment, perfect ease, where you can put down your burdens. First, you have to carry a few burdens. You have to develop generosity. You have to develop virtue. You have to develop your meditation. All of this is work. You look at the different images and analogies in the Pali Canon and the teachings of the Buddha. There’s no image of people just relaxing their way to awakening. They’re all images of people developing skills or people going into battle. There’s work that has to be done. After all, aging, illness, and death keep gnawing away at the mind. But they’re not the real problem. As long as we don’t get to the source of the real problem, they’ll keep gnawing away, though, and they’ll make us suffer. Sometimes we like to think that as we get older, it’s time to put down our jobs, put down our work, and simply be content with where we are. But it turns out some of the most difficult parts of life are going to be toward the end. The illnesses get worse. The body gets less and less obedient. Now we’re faced, of course, with the fact of death. Where are we going after we die? If we haven’t practiced all the way to awakening, we don’t know. We may have some ideas. A lot of people simply just don’t want to think about the issue because they can’t see any way around it. So there’s work that has to be done. And the work is in the mind. Fortunately, it’s good work, like the work of meditation. It doesn’t involve harming anybody. You don’t harm yourself. You don’t harm other people. It doesn’t require a lot of equipment. I mean, there are people who go out and buy all kinds of meditation accessories, as if that would make up for the fact that they’re not meditating. But all you have to do is just focus on your breath. Find a quiet spot, both inside and out, so the mind can really observe itself. It’s spent so much of its life observing things outside and locating the sources of problems outside. Now it’s time to look within, to find that the source of the problem is within, but also the cure lies within as well. Some people object to the Buddha’s analysis of suffering, saying that it lets the world suck. Other people are misbehaving. There are all kinds of horrible things happening out there. How can you say the source of your suffering is inside? Well, the answer is that by focusing inside and saying that the source of the solution lies inside as well, it’s putting you in a position of power. We live in a human world where there are going to be good things and bad things happening. People doing what we want, people doing what we don’t want. To some extent, we can have an influence on how other people act, what they do, what they say, and sometimes we have no influence at all. And if our happiness is dependent on getting other people to do what we want, well, we’ve seen what that does to the world. People running around trying to get other people to do what they want, they end up killing other people. And still don’t get them to do what they want. If that’s the source of happiness, we’re all going to die miserable. But you look inside, and you have certain qualities—mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind; alertness, the ability to watch what you’re doing; and the desire to do it well. These are all qualities we can cultivate within ourselves. So even as the body gets weaker, the mind doesn’t have to get weaker with it, because the strength of the mind lies in five things. One is conviction. Formally, this means conviction in the Buddhist awakening. But what does that mean for you? It means that a human being has been able to develop his own inner resources to the point of finding true happiness. And as he said, these inner resources didn’t depend on his being any sort of special deva or god of any kind. They’re all qualities that we have within ourselves in a potential form. We can develop them too. That means we have this capability to happiness as possible. And it depends on our actions. That’s a good thing to believe. Based on that, there’s a strength of persistence when you stick with trying to develop what’s skillful and abandon what’s not. Mindfulness is the ability to keep this task in mind, remembering what you’ve heard from other people, read in books, and what you’ve learned from your own meditation. So when you’re faced with a problem, you’re not having to reinvent the drama wheel all the time. You’ve gained experience from your practice. You’ve gained experience from what you’ve learned. You can put it to use. That’s what mindfulness is for—to remember all these things. Then as mindfulness gets developed, it turns into concentration. You get focused on something like the breath, something here in the present moment where you can establish your awareness with a sense of well-being, which puts you in a position where you can watch the mind. This is how you develop the fifth strength, which is discernment, when you can see, “Oh, this thought is creating suffering. This thought is helping put an end to that suffering. This way of breathing adds more suffering. This way of breathing helps relieve some of the suffering.” These perceptions, these feelings, these are the things that shape your mind. And you realize you can reshape them. We’ve been shaping our minds out of ignorance, which is why we cause ourselves suffering. But we can learn to do it with knowledge. You breathe with knowledge. You think, noticing where your thoughts are going, where they’re helpful, where they’re not. You don’t just go with a thought because you like it. Sometimes thoughts that you like you have to put aside because you see they’re having a bad effect on the mind. Other thinking that you may not like so much to begin with, but you realize that you think it, helps get the mind to develop a sense of dispassion. And you’re willing to think those thoughts. This is something where we really have to re-educate ourselves. Because we’ve gone around with images we’ve picked up from, who knows when, years back. So we have certain associations, and the old associations get stirred up. We can make ourselves miserable right now over sometimes very little things. You have to question those associations, question those images. So as the body begins to misfunction, you have a different set of images around the body, reminding yourself that the mind does not need the body in order to survive. As the Buddha said, “It survives on craving. It survives on clinging.” So when you leave this body, if you’re going to be reborn, you want to hold on to something that’s good. Hold on to a determination that wherever you want to go, wherever you’re reborn, you want to be reborn in a place where you can practice. So at the moment of death, you want to have your wits about you. That’s another good reason why there never comes a point in life where the work is done unless you become an arahant. Otherwise we face old age, illness, and death. These are big challenges right at the end, and they nibble at us. A little bit along the way, aging, illness. There’s always the possibility of dying at any time, so you want to be prepared all the time. But as the body sends you the message that it’s getting closer and closer, you’ve got to realize there’s work to be done. It’s good work. So you just don’t give up. Those teachings that say, “Well, just pretend that you have no hunger, pretend that everything is okay,” are very defeatist. They give the impression that there’s nothing you can do. So you might as well give up and learn how to content yourself with giving up. But that’s now what the Buddha taught. The Buddha never gave up. You look at all those ways in which you try to find true happiness, sometimes enduring extreme pain. But you never gave up. He’s like the craftsman who faces a problem and doesn’t give up until he’s solved the problem. A soldier who’s got an enemy doesn’t give up until he’s gotten past the enemy. Those are the images you want to hold in mind. Working with the breath, working with the mind, these are skills that we can develop. They’ll help us, even when we can’t stay with the breath in this body any longer. The lessons we’ve learned about the mind as we stay with the breath will carry us over. So there’s work to be done. It’s good work. It’s important work. So make sure that wherever you are, you find time to do it. Make the time to do it. And the effort you put in will be more than repaid.

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