Watch Yourself

June 5, 2019

The mind is like a disobedient child. You tell it to stay, and as soon as you look away, it’s gone. Of course, the question is why did you look away? A lapse in your alertness, a lapse in your mindfulness. You’ve got to keep watch over the mind as you watch the breath. There’s a double layer right there. In John Lee’s image, alertness is a pulley that you pull in one direction, then you pull in another direction. You watch the breath, make sure the breath is comfortable, and then you watch the mind to see if the mind is ready to stay here, and if it’s going to stay here. Then the quality of ardency is what makes it stay. But the watching is important. There’s a point that you realize that, as you’re being mindful of the breath, trying to get the mind to settle down, the role of alertness is not simply to be aware of whatever is coming up in the present. There are a lot of things happening in the present right now that are not really relevant to what you’re doing. So when the Buddha defines alertness, it’s not a matter of open awareness, just letting anything come through and noting whatever comes through. It’s watching very specifically what you’re doing and the results that are coming from what you’re doing. That’s it. Because, after all, the instructions for right mindfulness are the instructions for how you get the mind into right concentration. In that chant we had just now, the section on right concentration discussed the levels of mindfulness, but it didn’t say how to do it. The “how to do it” is in the section on right mindfulness. You focus on the body in and of itself. In this case, it’s the breath in and of itself, just how it feels right now. Where do you feel it? Try to clear away your preconceived notions about where the breath comes in, where it goes out, where you should be feeling it. Notice, well, where do you actually feel it? Maybe in an unexpected place. Remember the sensations that let you know, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” Stay with those. That’s the breath in and of itself. Then you’ve got those three qualities, ardent, alert, and mindful. Mindful means keeping the breath in mind, keeping in mind what you’ve got to do here. Alert is watching what you’re doing, and then ardency is trying to do it well. Then finally, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts of the world right now get put aside. Giving your thoughts about the meditation hall you’re sitting in. Erase any thoughts that tell you where you are right now. Erase any thoughts that even tell you where you’re facing right now. You know that the body faces forward, but the mind doesn’t face in any direction. We’ve taken on the assumption or the supposition that our mind is facing in the same direction as our eyes. But now that our eyes are closed, we don’t need that assumption. Put it aside. Just think of awareness around the body. So it’s not the case that your eyes are doing the looking at the different parts of the body. Each part of the body is sensitive. So allow that sensitivity to be present. And then watch to make sure that you stay. That’s one level of this ability to watch yourself, called alertness. The next level is called evaluation. You work with the breath. Now that you know where you feel it, how does it feel? Does it feel comfortable? What a different way of breathing feel? More comfortable? Well, you can try. You can experiment with longer, shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow—any combination of those. And see what the different kinds of breathing do for the body and the mind right now. Or you can simply pose the question, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” and see how the body responds. And if it responds well, stick with it. If it doesn’t respond well, go back to consciously experimenting. What you’re doing is trying to develop a sense of ease in the body. And then you want to let it spread. The Buddha’s image for this is of a bathman. Back in the old days, they didn’t have soap. They had a kind of powder that they mixed with water to make a kind of dough that you would then rub over your body. And making this soap dough is the same way as making bread dough. You’ve got the water, you’ve got the flour. You mix the two and you make sure that every part of the pile of flour is moistened. But you don’t add so much water that it drips. Everything is just right. And then you have to work it through so there are no dry lumps. In the same way, you want to take this sense of ease and well-being that comes when the breath feels good and let it work through the body. So you’re getting the most use out of the ease. And also you’re avoiding one of the big pitfalls, which is when the breath gets really comfortable and your range of awareness is very small, you tend to drift off. You go for the ease and you forget the breath. Or sometimes the breath gets so subtle you can’t follow it. So it’s good to have a whole-body awareness, a whole-body sense of pleasure, a sense of whole-body breathing, all working together. And then when the breath seems as good as you can make it, that’s when you drop the evaluation and just settle in. That’s the second level of this ability to watch yourself. The third level is what the Buddha calls having your theme well in hand. In other words, you get the mind in a concentration and it’s solid enough. And then you can step back a little bit. His image is of a person sitting looking at a person lying down, or a person standing looking at a person sitting. In other words, you’re up a little bit from what you’re actually doing. And you’re able to observe it and see, “Where is there stress in here? What am I doing to cause it? Can I stop doing that?” These are the questions of appropriate attention or formidable truths. That’s how you begin to develop discernment based on your concentration. So these three levels of watching yourself will carry you all the way through the path. So it’s good that you develop this quality of being able to observe yourself. This is where the image of the committee of the mind becomes useful. One part of the mind is doing something, another part watches. It’s this other part that watches that gives you some more circumspection. This applies not only to the concentration practice, but to the practice as a whole. When you think of doing something, there should be another part of the mind that says, “Is that the right thing?” And that can watch. If you decide that it is the right thing, well, is it really the right thing? The Buddha taught this to his son Rahula when Rahula was seven years old. Look at your actions and see what results you’re getting. Look all around. We know we’re supposed to be intent in what we’re doing, but at the same time we have to step back enough to see what’s happening, what impact we’re having on ourselves, on the people around us. What’s the ripple effect of what you’re doing? And one part of the mind says, “I want to do this.” There should be another part of the mind that says, “Is it wise?” And it has the strength to say, “No,” if it sees that it’s not wise. If the mind were a monolith, it wouldn’t be able to do this. This is why the committee of the mind, even though sometimes it’s very frustrating to have so many opinions going on, is useful when you’ve got them tamed so you can gaze at yourself. It gives you more circumspection to your decisions and also allows you to see a lot of the assumptions that you’ve picked up that seem very natural. They’re not always the most skillful thing to be carrying around. The Thai jhans talk about this a lot, what they call the Thai word which comes from the Thai language, which means convention or supposition or agreement. The mind has its agreements. Sometimes they’re purely your internal agreements, and sometimes they’re your agreements with the rest of society. And they’re your agreements with different societies, if you’ve got a background in different cultures. You realize you take on one set of assumptions for one culture and another for another. It’s like the assumptions of language. Certain words, when you say them, are dirty words in one language, but they’re perfectly common in another. And when you’re speaking that second language, you have to forget about the implications in the first language. You may think, “Well, the first one is real. The first language you learn is what things really are.” But you’ve got to learn how to question that. Your assumptions go deeper even than language. Assumptions create suffering. So you have to learn how to step back from all these things so you can get a sense of when they’re useful and when they’re not. You can make a comparison with money. If you’re in Thailand, use baht. If you’re in America, use dollars. And it’s not that one is more real than the other. It’s just that you know which to pull out of your wallet when you’re in which country, and which section is going to get what you want. And the part of your mind that’s able to step back can make this kind of judgment. So this ability to observe, to be alert, to evaluate, and to have your theme well in hand, is an extremely important part of the practice. It’s what allows the practice to grow. Because we’re not here simply to follow instructions. Because there are no instructions possible that could deal with all the things that are going to come up in your mind. You’ve got to learn how to take the basic principles and learn how to apply them, and then watch to see if you’re applying them well. There are a lot of things that are going to go on in your mind that nobody else can watch for you. So an important part of the meditation is to train yourself to be a good judge. When you step back and watch, that’s going to come with more mindfulness, more concentration, more discernment, as you exercise these things. So when issues come up in the mind where you’re creating unnecessary suffering for yourself, one, you have to see the suffering. Two, you have to see that it’s unnecessary. And three, you have to see that there’s an alternative. Then can you get past it? It requires mindfulness, concentration, discernment, alertness, evaluation. The ability to step back and observe and get so that you can be a trustworthy observer. Because only then will you make progress in the path, and only then will you be in a position to know whether it really is progress and whether you’ve taken the path as far as it can go. You want to go as far as it can go because that’s for your true happiness. So you owe it to yourself to learn how to watch yourself and watch yourself well.

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