Reflecting on the Requisites

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If the mind were basically passive, you would come to a quiet place like this and it would calm down automatically. But the fact that it doesn’t calm down shows you how active it is. It’s constantly looking for things. Not all too often it’s looking for trouble. But conversely, if the mind gets trained, it can go to a very disturbing place and not be disturbed, which shows the power of the mind. This is why the Buddha said one of the distinguishing features or distinguishing characteristics of a wise person, as opposed to a fool, is that the mind needs to be trained. The true happiness comes from training the mind, whereas the fool doesn’t see that. So that’s why we are working on the mind and giving it something good to build. If it wants to build something out of the present moment, have it build a state of concentration. Otherwise, it’ll take its thoughts and start building who knows what. It needs to be occupied. There will come a point in the training where it doesn’t need to be occupied anymore. That’s at the end of the path. But meanwhile, on the path, you’ve got to occupy yourself with the path, creating the path, bringing it into being. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha taught right mindfulness. His instructions on mindfulness are instructions on how to get the mind into deep concentration. You focus on the body in and of itself, in this case the breath. Ardent, alert, and mindful. Mindful means you keep the breath in mind, and you also keep in mind whatever lessons you’ve learned from the past about how to get the mind to settle down, and how to recognize problems as they come up, and how to handle them. Alert means to watch what’s actually going on, and particularly watch what you’re doing. And then ardency is trying to do it well, being wholehearted in giving yourself to this. And then you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world, any references to the world out there. Even the world of other people in the room right now, you put them aside. If you stick with this, the mind’s going to get into concentration. You’re creating a state of concentration. As long as the mind is active and wants to build things, take your Lego set of thoughts and verbal and mental and bodily fabrication and build a state of concentration. That way you keep the mind occupied. That’s one way of dealing with the fact that there’s not that much sensory stimulus. The other way is to be very careful and very meticulous about the basic functions of life. This is why we have that reflection on the requisites. Things are stripped down to fairly basic essentials here. And if you’re not careful, you can find the mind creating huge issues around food, clothing, shelter, medicine. So you don’t want to watch it. Like with food, the Buddha says, you want to eat for the purpose of keeping the body alive and healthy enough to practice. And that’s it. You don’t eat playfully. You don’t eat for the sake of putting on bulk. You don’t eat so much that you get stuffed. So there’s a standard against which to measure the way you eat and against which you can measure your attitude towards food. And since we have one meal a day here, you have to watch out for that tendency. The mind says, “Well, I’m not going to be eating tonight, so I might as well stoke up a little extra.” And the way to do that is to get sleepy after the meal, get tired after the meal, because so much of your energy is going into digestion. So as you’re eating, you have to watch yourself. And because we have concentration to play with, the mind says, “Well, I want to play with my food.” You say, “No, you’ve got something better to play with. Let’s be a little bit more scrupulous in how we eat.” Medicine. Look at the Buddhist standards and then measure them against how you’re actually approaching it. In terms of clothing, I think I’ve told you the story of when I was newly ordained. A lot of the young monks at Watasokaram, which was a forest monastery, the new ones were planning to stay for only three months. And so their parents didn’t want to go to the expense of arranging for forest robes, so they bought store-bought robes. They tended to be bright orange, which did not fit in with the forest monastery, and so there was the opportunity to dye your robes. And all the new monks got obsessed with dyeing their robes. Sometimes they dyed them three or four times to get just the right color brown. And there were long discussions about which colors to mix, how much orange, how much brown. Some liked to put a little blue in. It just went to show how much the mind can get obsessed with the basics when it doesn’t have other things to build. So as you eat, as you put on your clothing, ask yourself, “Why am I doing this?” As you go into a shelter, ask yourself, “Why am I doing this?” As you use medicine, to what extent are you using medicine? What is your basic level of health, and to what extent are you going beyond that? It’s in these little things that you begin to catch yourself. There’s a Thai phrase, “sumroi,” which means you follow somebody in so that you can’t be detected. You step in their footsteps so you don’t leave any separate trail behind. And that’s exactly what the defilements do. Clothing, shelter, and medicine—these are things we need. And so they slip in and make us want more than we really need, or make us more obsessed about these things than is really worthwhile. If you’re going to be obsessed with something, be obsessed about getting the mind in concentration. If you want something to play around with, play around with the concentration. Focus in different parts of the body. Spend an hour focused, say, on your feet. See what that’s like. An hour focused on your hands. There are lots of things you can do with the breath energy. There are lots of places in the body where you can stay focused. Lots of ways you can imagine the breath energy. And that can be your entertainment. That’s not just entertainment. You get to know the mind better. You begin to see how it fabricates things so that when you get sensitive to that, you get to know what you’re doing, what you’re bringing to the present moment. As you sit here, you begin to see that also as you go through the day. But again, you have to be a little bit strict with yourself as you go through the day. Don’t let the mind simply wander around. Try to stay anchored in the breath. The Buddha’s images of the six senses are like six animals. They’re all tied to a leash, and the leashes are tied together in a knot. If they’re not tied to a post, then whichever sense gets most stimulated is going to pull all the other ones along. In his image you have a crocodile and a monkey and a bird and a hyena and a dog and a snake. The crocodile is the strongest of the bunch. It’s just going to drag everybody down into the river where they drown. But if you have a post, you can tie all the leashes to the post and pull as they might like. The animals are going to stay right next to the post, and they finally settle down. The post, the Buddha says, stands for mindfulness immersed in the body. And one of the ways of immersing mindfulness in the body is to keep it with the breath. You have to be fully aware of the breath energy throughout the body. In fact, the sutta on mindfulness immersed in the body is one of the ones where the Buddha shows how mindfulness practice is meant to lead to jhana practice. As you work with the breath, you get a sense of your awareness of the body filling the breath, so you can be aware of the whole body. You breathe with a sense of ease. You fill the whole body, and there you are in right concentration. So as long as the mind needs to be preoccupied, preoccupy it with the breath. Preoccupy it with the concentration. And then from that perspective, watch the goings-on in the mind as it sends out its little blips, its little signals, its little impulses. In the past, you acted on with that really realizing it. But now you have a chance to slow down in an environment that allows you to see the actions of the mind in and of themselves. You can see how, if you’re not careful, you just flow along with them. But here we’re going against the flow. And there’ll be parts of the mind that will complain. Just don’t identify with them. Realize, OK, these are actually the problems. These are the ones that were going out looking for trouble before. When you’re not giving them grist for the mill, of course they’re going to complain. But if you can get other members of the committee on your side by creating a sense of well-being with the concentration, then you can step back from those voices that you used to identify with. And you can free yourself from a lot of their power.

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