Maintaining

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We often talk about watching the breath, which may be a mistake, because our eyes get involved. And the breath is not something you’re going to see with your eyes. The type of awareness that you want with the breath is not the type that you want with your eyes. The eyes tend to focus on something. Leaving other things out of focus. Whereas the awareness you want to have with the breath is a full body awareness, not one particular point. You want to think of it as being all around. You could think of wearing the breath or being bathed in the breath. To indicate the kind of awareness you’d like, think about being bathed in a nice warm shower or sitting in a hot tub with warm water all around you. That quality of awareness where you’re relaxed and every part of the body has equal weight. That’s the kind of awareness you’re looking for. In the beginning, we’ll focus on one area of the body at a time. Just think of that word “focus” as something the eyes do. But you don’t want to be aware of the body section by section first before you go to the next. You want to sense what the breath feels like in different parts of the body. So that when you spread your whole body awareness, nothing gets left out. So you can start out around the navel. Watch that part of the body as you breathe in and breathe out. Notice how it feels. And have the navel know the navel. In other words, don’t think of your eyes going down there and focusing on it. Ask yourself, “Where in my body right now do I feel the area of the abdomen?” Allow that feeling to have some prominence. Then you can move up to the solar plexus, middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head, down the shoulders, down the arms, down the back, down the legs. Think of each part of the body knowing itself. Then, as they’re all aware, see if you can add them all together. Be aware all around, all at the same time. Out to the tips of the toes, out to the tips of the fingers. Then try to maintain that full body awareness. As John Fung used to say, there are three stages to settling in. One is doing the concentration, in other words, getting the mind focused. And then the second one is maintaining. This is where you have to deal with boredom, because you’re going to be maintaining a fairly steady sense of well-being. And even though it’s well-being, the mind can get bored. It likes variety. Its idea of happiness is things that move around, which is why that passage where the Buddha said, “There is no happiness other than peace,” so often gets mistranslated to say, “There is no happiness higher than peace.” But he’s saying something much more radical. True happiness is peaceful. And the pleasures we have that are not peaceful, they’re not really happy. There’s a lot of grasping, there’s a lot of clinging. The sensations come and then they go, and by the time you’ve grasped them, they’ve slipped out of your hands. Nowadays they don’t let people play with mercury anymore, but when we were little kids, if a thermometer broke, we’d play with mercury. It’d slither here and slither there. That’s the way a lot of pleasures are. You can’t really grasp hold of them. You try to grasp, and all you get is a fist holding nothing but tents. That’s the clinging. So we’re trying to create a sense of ease that’s steady and peaceful. And then counteract the mind’s tendency to be bored with that. So of course, the first thing you’ve got to see is those thoughts of boredom. That’s what they are. They’re distractions. You don’t have to identify with them. They come in and they can go. And then you try to find the right balance. You can maintain the sense of well-being, but not clamp down. Because as soon as you start clamping down, it gets tight, tense, and the well-being is gone. So try to create a sense of well-being that feels light and buoyant. And in maintaining it, you’re going to see a lot of little things in the mind that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. This is how the practice of concentration moves into the third stage, which is using it. As you maintain it, you begin to see these little defilements. And as long as you stay focused on your desire to keep the mind still, you find that those defilements are not so attractive. It’s when they get attractive, that’s when you lose it. So stay focused. Stay focused on your skill. And you find there are a lot of little defilements that just fall away by the wayside. I was reading a book a while back on craftspeople. It was pointing out how craftsmen and craftswomen tend to have certain character traits that they had to develop in order to master the craft. There’s a certain amount of patience, consistency, and ability to roll with the punches. In other words, you see that you made a mistake while you realize there are ways of correcting for it. You don’t let the mistakes knock you out. There are a lot of really good, solid character traits. And as you’re developing them, it’s not so much that you’re focused on developing the character traits. You’re focused on your skill. And because of your desire to master the skill, you find yourself taking other things in stride. The things that would pull you away, you learn how not to identify with them. The thoughts that would pull you away. Little urges coming through the mind. You learn how to ignore them. So that you build character without thinking about building character. You may be working on wood, you may be working with gold, you may be working with some material. But at the same time, you find that you’re also working with the mind. Well, it’s the same thing with working with the breath. As you’re working with the breath and trying to maintain this sense of stillness, this sense of well-being with the body, qualities of mind get developed. Little defilements that would get in the way, they get pushed off to the side or allowed off to the side. So even though you’re not thinking about developing insight, the concentration in trying to maintain the concentration, insights come. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha didn’t teach a separate tranquility technique or a separate insight technique. He just listed different questions. How do you get the mind still? How do you get it to settle in? That tends toward the tranquility. How do you comprehend the fabrications? How do you view them? How do you regard them? As you’re trying to get the mind to settle in, any fabrications that are outside of the concentration, you regard them as nothing you want to get involved with. And if you’re able to shed them, whether you think of them as being inconstant or stressful or not-self or whatever you think of them, you’ve got the point, which is that they’re not desirable. There are three perceptions in there as value judgments to help you in your overall value judgment, which is that you want to find the end of suffering, which requires developing certain qualities and letting go of others. And so if you can let go, even without thinking about it as being inconstant or stressful or not-self, just thinking, “This is not something I want. I don’t want it.” The fact that you’ve learned to see thoughts in the mind as not what you want, that’s the whole purpose of those perceptions. So focus on your craft. Focus on finding that stillness inside, maintaining that stillness, and in the course of maintaining that stillness, you move on to using it to clean out the mind, to develop good character traits. And you start developing deeper and deeper insights without even thinking about it. Insight is not something you do. You do the concentration work, you do the tranquility work, and then it’s part of doing that work. You learn to see the defilements that we get in the way as what they are, their hindrances, rather than something you ordinarily might find interesting. Now you see that they’re not worth getting involved with. That’s how the maintaining shades into using. And the tranquility provides the conditions for the insight. Because after we’re together, tranquility, the Buddha said, is there to develop dispassion inside to fight against ignorance. And the two have to go together. And he said it’s through the practice of concentration, through the practice of jhana, that you do that. So you can take care of both sides as you learn how to master the skills of the breath. Without your thinking about it, the character of the mind will be lost. It’ll grow and mature. And that’s what we’re here for, is a mature mind, to foster the conditions by which it will develop. And it’ll develop for you. The Jhans often make a comparison with a tree. You want the tree to grow, but you don’t get it to grow by pushing it and pulling on it. You water it, you give it fertilizer, keep the bugs off of it, and the tree will grow on its own. All you have to do is provide the conditions. And that’s what we do as we try to maintain this sense of full body awareness around the breath, being bathed with the breath, keeping it focused, light, buoyant. Making the most of the potentials that we find here.

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