Don’t Drift Off

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One of the prerequisites for getting your mindfulness established, the Buddha says, is to make sure that your views are straightened out. And the primary view you want to have straightened out is your idea of where suffering comes from. There’s the stress and the fact that things change. But then there’s the stress and suffering that comes from your ignorance. That’s your own craving. It comes from within the mind. And that’s the stress and suffering that weighs the mind down. So that’s the problem we have to solve. The stress and the fact that the world changes is always going to be there. You can’t stop that. But you can learn how to put an end to the stress and suffering that come from craving. That’s why we’re meditating. Mindfulness means keeping that point in mind. We’re here to understand how the mind works. After all, we all want happiness, we all want pleasure and ease. Yet why do our actions lead to suffering so many times? The reason the Buddha says this is because of our ignorance. One, we don’t know what we’re doing. And two, we don’t understand what kinds of actions would lead to the end of suffering and which ones would lead to more suffering. So this is where we straighten out our views. The reason we need to have this in the background as we’re meditating, as we’re establishing mindfulness, is to keep reminding ourselves why we’re here, what we should be looking for. We’re not simply here to watch things arise and pass away. We’re here to figure out something. How does the mind fool itself? How does the mind lie to itself? How does the mind, while it’s thinking that it’s going to create happiness, end up creating suffering? What is it doing? So we’re here to observe the mind in action. And to do that, we have to stay in the present moment. We’re here not because the present moment is a wonderful moment, but because this is where everything is happening. We want to observe it. We have to get very still. Now the problem is, if we sit here with our eyes closed, trying not to think of anything outside, cutting off all reference to the world outside, it’s very easy to fall asleep, to drift in and out, or to fall into what Ajahn Lee calls delusion concentration, where things are very quiet but not very clear. You’re in a big blur. So as you get started out, realize that that’s one of the dangers, that may be one of the directions your mind tends to go. So you’ve got to do what you can to prevent it from going there. This is one of the reasons why Ajahn Lee recommends that you make a survey of the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Take a good, long, deep in-and-out breath, or several. Take a long in-and-out breath to help emphasize the sensation of where your body is right now. You may find that in order to stay awake, you have to keep up long breathing, or even heavy breathing for a while. Not so heavy that the people outside can hear you, but strong. Because if the breath gets too weak, you start drifting off. The eyes may notice the breath, and the nose may notice the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen. Focus your attention there. Then ask yourself, “Where are your arms right now? Where are your legs right now? Where is your head right now?” Just keep making a survey around and around and around to ground yourself. Learn to take an interest in how the mind responds to the breath, how the body responds to the breath. Because it’s right here that you’re going to see the various processes that the Buddha said lead to suffering. He calls them fabrication, sankara. It basically means how the mind puts things together through its intentions, and all too often the intentions are buried. Learn how to become more sensitive to these things. There’s bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. The Buddha calls it direct thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a topic, and then you make comments about it, ask questions about it, have an internal discussion about it. And then there’s mental fabrication, perception, and feelings. Perceptions are the images you have in mind, the names you give to things. And feelings are feeling tones—pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. These are the things that make up our mental states, our bodily and mind states. So you want to be able to observe them. And the best way to observe them is to use them. So you’re using them to get the mind to settle down. You focus on the breath—that’s the bodily fabrication—and you talk to yourself about the breath. And you have to keep on talking to yourself as long as that’s necessary to keep yourself awake. Ask questions about the breath. Where does the breath come in? Where does it go out when it begins to start in the body? There’s that sensation that in the body itself it’s going to pull the air in. Where does that start? Is there one location or are there many? In other words, you don’t have to take an interest in what’s going on, because otherwise you will put yourself to sleep. There’s a tendency for the breath to get more gentle, and our automatic association when the breath is gentle and your eyes are closed is to fall asleep. But you’ve got to remind yourself that you’re here to learn something, so you don’t want to be lured by the “he succumbs” into letting go of your initial question, which is, “Why does this mind of mine, which I think is mine, do things to me that I don’t like?” You have to have a strong sense that the mind is doing things that you don’t like. If you’re okay with your mind, it’s going to be hard to observe it. It’s when you realize there’s something wrong here. That’s when you start getting observant. It’s like the police. Ordinary law-abiding citizens are not interested, and they don’t know much about them. It’s the people who are breaking the law. Those are the ones that the police are following. They keep tabs on them. I myself, as far as I know, didn’t have a file in the FBI until I stood in a vigil outside the White House. The first time I got there, this car drove up just a few minutes after I got there. This guy got out with a woman, and she was wearing a dress. They pretended like they were doing a fashion shot, but they took a picture of me. So I got into the files by doing something they didn’t like. So that’s the attitude you’ve got to have towards your own mind. Greed, aversion, and delusion, we think, are our friends. When greed comes, we think that whatever it is we’re greedy for, that’s something that’s really desirable. That’s perfectly normal. When we’re angry at something, whatever we’re angry at really is something worth getting angry about. When delusion comes, we tell ourselves, “I don’t need to know about that. Why should I bother thinking about it? Why should I bother paying attention to it?” That’s our problem. We’re okay with our defilements. You have to understand that these are the things that are causing trouble in your life, and you’re going to try to figure them out. You’re going to keep watch. So you have to remind yourself that there are questions to ask here. When the mind leaves the breath, how does it do that? There are decisions being made in the mind underground. And sometimes they’re made right in front of you, but they happen so quickly that you hardly notice them. It’s just a little blip in the mind. But if you really are quiet and observant, you begin to notice. There was a discussion in there. The question is, how do we get away? What do we want to go to? When do we get away? How can we watch to see when the person doing the meditation is distracted, so we can slip out and we’re gone? You want to watch out for those things. After all, what should be the most interesting thing in life is what your mind is doing and how it’s lying to itself. The ease that comes when we’re trying to get the mind quiet so it can see these things, and the mind’s inclination not to want to see itself, those things pull you away. So you have to realize those are the two things you’ve got to watch out for. Then there’s the complaint. It’s boring. You’re sitting here, breathing in, breathing out, and nothing is happening. Again, that’s the mind trying to deceive you, trying to pull your attention away. Or there’s that strong temptation, when there’s a sense of ease, just to wallow in the ease and forget that there are reasons why there is that ease there. The fact that you’re steadily with the breath creates ease and alertness. So you’re trying to learn how to maintain both of those qualities. Here again, it’s good to think about the different parts of the breath, the different parts of the body. If you can sense the breath and the different parts of the body so much, the better. But even if you can’t, ask yourself, “Where are my hands right now?” Kind of relax all the joints. Relax the joints in the fingers, in the palms, the backs of the hands, the wrists, up the arms. And start down at the toes. Relax the muscles and tendons. And the toes, the joints in the feet and the ankles. Work your way up. Visualize the different bones. And as you sense, say, the bones in your shins, ask yourself, “Where are the shins right now? Where are those bones?” Be sensitive to where there’s tension there and see if you can relax it. And see if the in-breath or the way you breathe in interferes with your efforts to relax it. Work your way up. Work your way up through the pelvis, through the spine, each vertebrae, one at a time, up to the neck, up to the skull, down the front of the body, down the rib cage. Move around so that you’re thoroughly grounded here. That way you help maintain your alertness. At the same time, the things are quieting down. Because that, the Buddha said, is the ideal way to develop the mind, to develop tranquility and insight at the same time. And as you’re quiet, you can see how the way you breathe has an impact on the mind. How you talk to yourself is going to have an impact on the mind. The perceptions, the words that come to mind, or the images that come to mind, they have an impact. You can think about the perception of how you’re breathing, how the breath runs in the body. And see if you can create another image of how it does. There are lots of possibilities of how the breath energy can run in the body. See which metal image helps it flow most easily. This way you get to see the mind in action. And this is where it gets really interesting, because these are the same actions that can be used to create a path, but they’re also the actions that can be used to create suffering if you’re not careful. So you have a strong sense that the mind has lots of potentials, good and bad, and it’s very quick to change direction, realizing there’s a lot to learn. So when you’re getting the mind still, it’s not simply to rest in the stillness. It’s so that you can not be distracted by the motions of the mind, the motions of the body, that would interfere with seeing what kind of decisions are being made. How are they being made? Who’s making them? What’s their purpose? Only those things. Then you can be here and fulfill the purpose of being here, which is not to rest, but to learn, to explore, to explore your own mind. What else could be more interesting?

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