The Practice in a Word (outdoors)

June 18, 2023

Focus on your breath. Try to be totally with the breath all the way in, all the way out, wherever you feel the breath. It’s good to start with some good, long, deep in and out breaths to energize the body. Because in the course of the hour, things are going to get pretty calm. Before you calm down, you need some energy. So breathe deep, breathe long. And then when long, deep breathing gets uncomfortable, then you can begin to shorten it, make it more shallow. Adjust it so that it feels just right. We’re using the breath as an anchor to keep the mind in the present moment because we want to watch the mind in action. And if you’re in your thoughts of the past or in your thoughts of the future, you’re living in the results of the mind’s actions, but you’re not seeing the actions themselves. It’s like watching a movie. You see a lot more when you’re there while the movie is being made. You see what happens behind the camera, what happens behind the scenes. You understand how they create their special effects. And you begin to get a sense of how artificial the whole thing is. This is a good lesson to learn for your own thoughts. Because all too often we take our thoughts too seriously. We believe in what we think, and it can make us suffer. It’s better to watch the mind as it’s creating the thoughts so you get an idea of when it’s acting in a reliable way and when it’s not. You get to see how much thought and care go into the making of the thoughts, and you begin to realize some of your careless thoughts are the ones that have the most impact on you if you go into them. But if you realize that they were put together in a hurry, without really thinking things through, you realize this is how you fool yourself. Now, if this is just a question of entertainment, it wouldn’t be too serious. But we live our lives, we make our decisions that shape our lives based on our thinking. So we need to get a good sense of when our thoughts are reliable and when they’re not. This is the basic principle of the Buddha called heedfulness. Realizing that your actions do have consequences, and they make a huge difference. There are people who like to reduce the Buddha’s teachings to a single word, like mindfulness, acceptance, compassion. Single words, simple ideas. But when the Buddha reduced his teachings to one word, he reduced them to heedfulness, and that’s not a simple idea. It has many implications. The first implication is that there are dangers, but there’s also the possibility of safety. If the world were nothing but dangerous, if your mind were nothing but dangerous, there’d be nothing you could do about it. But the fact is, your actions do have consequences, and they can make a difference. So even though it’s one word, at the very least it has two ideas, skillful and unskillful. In other words, skillful actions lead to safety, well-being, unskillful actions lead to harm, danger. And you have the choice. It’s not like the stars are forcing us to do things. We do have freedom of choice, and we have to be very careful how we exercise that freedom. All of that is included in the word heedfulness. As the Buddha said, heedfulness is the root of all the skillful things you do. All the elements of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—all come out of heedfulness. You follow the precepts because you know that if you don’t follow the precepts, there are going to be bad consequences for you and for other people. You practice concentration because you know that if you act carelessly, if you’re not clear about what’s going on in your mind, you can make some unskillful choices and not realize it. So you have to get the mind quiet first so that it can observe itself. And then there’s discernment, where you begin to understand why it is that the mind will do things that sometimes it knows are dangerous, but it does them anyhow. Why is that? Because discernment sees through the ways the mind has to distract itself, fool itself, fool itself into making bad decisions, thinking that they’re right. All of this comes from heedfulness. So if you really care for your happiness, you’ll try to adopt this attitude. There are dangers in the mind. There’s greed, there’s aversion, there’s delusion. But there are also good qualities in the mind. When the Buddha tells you to develop virtue, concentration, discernment, or qualities like mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, he’s asking you to take qualities that you already have to some extent, but to develop them further. As we’re meditating right here, mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Like right now, you’re trying to remember to stay with the breath. Each time you forget, just remind yourself again, and that way you strengthen your mindfulness. Alertness is what actually watches what’s going on. It notices, “Okay, now the mind has slipped off. It’s time to remember where to go.” And when you’re with the breath, you’re trying to be very clear about how you’re relating to the breath. And if the breath is not comfortable or the mind hasn’t settled down, that’s when you bring in the quality of ardency, trying to do this well, trying to figure out what’s the problem. If the mind doesn’t fit with the breath or the breath doesn’t fit with the mind, is the problem with the breath or is it with the mind? You want to figure this out so that you can really know what’s going on here in the present moment. Where all your choices are being made. If the problem is with the breath, you can change the way you breathe. Or for some reason today you have trouble staying with the breath, there are other topics you can think about to make you more inclined to want to stay with the breath. The Buddha recommends thinking about the Buddha himself, the fact that he was able to gain awakening by watching his breath. What’s the difference between his breath and yours? What’s different is the set of qualities that he brought. But again, these are qualities that you can develop, too. You can think of the Dharma. We’re fortunate that we have a Dharma that explains what’s going on in our minds and how we can learn how not to suffer. You can think of the Sangha, the Buddhist followers who’ve followed his path and discovered that he was right, that there is a way to find happiness that doesn’t change, happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, through your own efforts. Thinking in these ways is encouraging to make you want to get back to the breath. If you’re feeling down in yourself, you can think about your past generosity, times when you gave when you didn’t have to. Think about your past virtue, times when you held by your principles, even when it was hard, and you realized that you have some worth to you. You have hope as a meditator. In other words, you learn to think in ways that make you more inclined to want to watch your own mind right here, right now, and to be able to settle down. It’s in this way that you carry through with that principle of equalness. You want to watch the mind as it makes its choices, and here’s the place to watch it. You’ve got a front row seat. When you’re with the breath, you’re at the point where the mind and the body meet. So if there’s going to be anything you do, it has to go through the breath. Whatever you pick up from the world outside goes through the breath. This is the best place to be right now, if you’re heedful, if you want to learn how the mind can become more reliable, more trustworthy, make better decisions, be clearer about what it’s doing. It’s all happening right here, so you want to maintain it. You want to maintain this as your frame of reference. As for thoughts of the world outside, right now you can put them aside. Focus your attention now on really getting to know your own mind. And as you get to know your own mind better, you begin to realize that the Buddha was right to boil his teachings down to this one principle of heedfulness. He teaches you about cause and effect, teaches you about skillful and unskillful, the basic framework of the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha said was his most distinctive teaching, the truths that give guidance on how to act skillfully and to carry through your desire to be heedful and careful. So the choices you make really do lead to a way from suffering and toward its end.

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