The Skill of Renunciation

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The Buddha’s description of concentration is that you seclude your mind from sensuality and unskillful thoughts. Most of us, when we hear that you’re going to renounce sensuality, it sounds like a deprivation. But actually it’s not. You’re going to be trading one form of happiness for another. The sense of well-being that comes when the mind can settle down and be still. When the breath feels good in the body. And you allow that sensation of comfortable breathing to fill the whole body. When we talk of breath here, it’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the flow of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and go out. And that’s not restricted to the nose. You can feel it in the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen. And as you get very sensitive, you begin to realize that it relates to the entire nervous system. So when you’re going to focus on the breath, you can focus anywhere in the body. Take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths. And notice where the sensation of breathing is most prominent, where it’s clearest to see that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Focus your attention there. And then try to keep it there. Part of keeping it there is not just forcing the mind to stay, but by taking an inquisitive attitude. What kind of breathing would feel best right here? Longer? Shorter? Heavier? Lighter? Faster? Slower? Experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. Now as for any other thoughts that come into the mind, no matter how important they may seem, no matter how potentially entertaining they might be, tell yourself no. You’re trying to learn a skill. The skill of giving the mind a good place to stay, a good foundation inside. You can think about other things at any other time of the day. But for right now, you want to have the mind have some time for itself. Because the suffering that weighs down the mind, the stresses that weigh down the mind, are not so much the things that come in from outside, it’s how we process the things that come in from outside. If we process them with skill, then we don’t have to suffer. There’s no weight on the mind. So we’re here to learn a skill. So think about any manual skills that you’ve developed in the past. What qualities were needed? One is you learn the basic steps. And then two, you tried your hand. And then three, you looked at the results. And you try to be honest with yourself. Are the results good? Are they satisfactory? If they’re not, what can you go back and change? There was a medical school years back, specialized in surgery, especially brain surgery. And they wanted to figure out what are the best questions to ask during an interview, to get a good idea of what your potential students are like, whether they have the potential to be good surgeons or not. Because everybody who applied to the school had straight A’s. But just because someone has straight A’s in subjects doesn’t mean that they’ll be good in the operating room. And they discovered that two questions were really good at weeding out potential failures. The first one was, can you tell us about a mistake that you made recently? And if the candidate said, I can’t think of any mistakes I’ve made, that would be a check against them. And so the candidates who could think of a mistake and would be willing to tell it, the next question was, how would you do it differently? And if they hadn’t taken the time to think about how they would do something differently, they would be out too. That shows two good qualities that you want to look for in developing a skill. One is recognizing a mistake for a mistake. And then two, trying to figure out how to not repeat that mistake. So as you’re meditating here, and the breath doesn’t seem comfortable, ask yourself, what would make it more comfortable? You can try different ways of breathing. You can try different ways of visualizing the breath to yourself. As I said, if you think of it as a process that runs through the whole nervous system, you can make a survey of the body. Are your hands tense? That would be a sign that the breath isn’t flowing very well there. Okay, relax your hands. Then go up your arms through the wrists, the forearms, the elbows, the upper arms, the shoulders. And start down at the toes. Work your way up through the feet, the legs, the hips, up the spine, into the skull. Ask yourself, do you tense up during the in-breath? Do you hold on to tension during the out-breath in any of these parts? If you detect it, allow it to relax. And get so that you can breathe in and breathe out without having to tense up anywhere in the body at all. So as with any skill, you follow the instructions, but then you also use your own ingenuity to get the results that are satisfying to you. Because the whole point of concentration practice is that you can put the mind in a position where it has a sense of well-being inside, so it’s happy to stay in the present moment, so that it can watch itself. See where it’s getting involved in greed, or aversion, or delusion, even in very subtle levels. And for that, the mind has to be still. And it has to have a sense of well-being. Otherwise, it’s not going to be honest with itself. It’s going to say, well, this type of thinking is necessary, or I have to think about this, or I have to worry about that, or I have to entertain myself with other thoughts. Because there’s a sense of lack, inside. So you create a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness inside. That way, when an unskillful thought comes up, you’re not so eager to go after it. And you’re more willing to recognize, oh yes, that was not a very good thought to follow. And you have the strength not to follow it. So when the breath feels good, think of that good feeling spreading through the nervous system. And see if you can keep a full body awareness, so you’re aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And if you find that your attention begins to blur out with that whole body awareness, go back to the surveys of the body, until you’re ready to try to settle down again. So in this way, you’re actually bringing four qualities to the meditation. One is the desire to do it well. And two, persistence. You stick with it. The mind slips off, you bring it back. Slips off again, you bring it back again. You don’t get discouraged, but you’re trying to pay full attention. Which is the third quality. So notice, when the mind is about to slip off, what does it do? How does it talk to itself? How does it blank out? Because there’s that little moment of blanking out, as we go from one thought world to another. It’s like when they put on a play, and they’re going to change the scenery. They don’t allow you to see the stagehands coming in and taking off the old scenery and bringing in new scenery. They pull down a curtain. But if you could see them changing the scenery, it would spoil the illusion. And it’s the same way with the mind. You go from one thought world to another thought world, and there’s a moment of blanking out in between. But you don’t have to play along with that. It’s like going behind scenes. Even though the curtain is down, you’re behind the scenes, so you can still see the furniture moving around. You begin to see how artificial that illusion is. In that way, you begin to see how artificial your thought worlds are. And you begin to see the steps by which the mind goes from one thought world to another. You can start understanding what the motivation was, why you were going. And you can begin to detect that some of these thought worlds have some pretty unskillful motivations behind them. So you can make up your mind not to follow them, because you’re more aware. So when you see the things are going well, you maintain them. If you see they’re not going well, this is when you bring in the fourth quality, which is using your ingenuity. How do you change the breath? How do you adjust the mind? How do you adjust your perceptions? So it is easier to stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Again and again and again, with a sense of contentment to be here. Those are the basic steps in finding a sense of well-being that doesn’t have to depend on sensual thoughts. Because when the Buddha is talking about sensuality, it’s not so much sensual pleasures, it’s the fact that we’re so fascinated with thinking about them. We can spend hours and hours fantasizing about the sensual pleasure we’d like to have. And it’s a huge waste of time. It develops bad habits in the mind, bad attitudes. And it provides a happiness that’s really not satisfying. I said, “John, so what?” The founder of the monastery used to say, “The sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now? Gone.” And the memory of an old sensual pleasure is not necessarily a happy memory. Whereas if you can develop a sense of well-being that comes from a skill, then you can access it at any time. Here the skill is learning how to drop all your extraneous thoughts. And develop a sense of peace and well-being inside. Because only when there’s peace in the mind, it can have a real sense of well-being, a satisfying sense of well-being. It feels that it’s in its home, where it belongs. And it feels good to be here. So this is called renunciation. In other words, you decide you’re not going to play around with sensual fantasies. You’re going to find happiness. And happiness in a better way. It’s a trade up. It’s not a deprivation. It’s a wise exchange.

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