Heedfulness

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When you focus on your breath, you want to be with each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out, as continually as possible. The Buddha once asked the monks if they were heedful. He asked them, “How many times do you think about death in the course of a day?” And one monk said, “I think about death once a day.” Meaning that today I can do something important in training my mind. Another monk said that he thought about death twice a day, that he could do something important with this each half day. But the different monks made their claims and the time periods got shorter and shorter. So I finally got down to one monk who said, “Each time I breathe in, I say may I live to the time I breathe out so I can accomplish a great deal with my mind. Each time I breathe out, may I live to breathe in once more so I can accomplish a great deal with my mind.” And the Buddha said of all the monks, only the last one was heedful. All the rest were careless and complacent. Because the work that needs to be done has to be done right now. And if you put it off saying, “Well, I’ll do it in a few minutes from now or a few hours from now,” you don’t know what’s going to happen in those minutes, in those hours. But you do know that you have right now. And the work can be done right now. As the Buddha said, you get the most out of a Dharma talk when you don’t have too low an opinion of yourself. In other words, the idea that the things I’m listening to are too difficult, they’re beyond me. So I’ll just listen. The talk is meant so that you listen and then you look into your mind and say, “What is the talk talking about that’s in my mind right now?” In other words, you can do something about it if you’re engaging in it happily. But that leads to suffering. You can change your ways. Have the confidence that you can do that. That’s an important part of being heedful. We usually translate heedfulness as a sense of danger. But it should also be translated as a sense of possibilities. That your choice of what you’re going to do and say and think right now can have a wide range of results. So emit the really good results. Be confident that when they talk about staying with each breath, it’s something you can do. It may require a few new habits. Well, those are things you can develop right now. The Buddha never talked about the present moment as being a wonderful moment, but it is the moment where you can do the work that needs to be done. And if you decide that you’re not going to put it off to the future, that’s when you’re being heedful. And as the Buddha said, the root of all skillful qualities, all the goodness in life, comes from heedfulness. The sense of how important your actions are. And the sense that you have power in your power of choice. So you want to use that power well. Heedfulness is often equated with a sense of fear. But it’s a skillful kind of fear. The fear that you’re not going to use your powers to the best of your ability. That you’re going to misuse your powers. So it’s not like the kind of fear where you have a sense of powerlessness. This is a sense of fear that comes with a sense of power. As the Buddha said, if we couldn’t make a big change in our lives for the better by being skillful, in what we do and say and think, he wouldn’t be teaching these things. It’s because our actions do have power. That’s what he teaches. So if your thoughts are wandering off someplace else, you have to say no. Now in saying no, you can say no in two ways. One is, I won’t let myself think those thoughts at all. The other is, no, I’m not going to follow those thoughts. You can think of the mind as being like a committee. Some people in the corner of the room are talking, but you don’t have to get involved in their conversation. Just think of someone else talking, not you. You’re focusing on the breath. You’re focusing on making the breath as comfortable as you can. This is going to require getting interested in the breath. And if you see the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the nose, there’s not much to get interested in. It comes in, goes out, comes in, goes out. But if you connect it with other aspects of the wind element in the body, the flow of energy in the body, you begin to see that how you breathe has an impact on the entire body. That makes it interesting. If you’re suffering from illnesses, suffering from pains, there are ways you can breathe to mitigate the illness, mitigate the pain. At the very least make it lighter. Sometimes you can make it go away. Because there are a lot of pains that come simply from the fact that you’re not paying attention to certain parts of your body and the breath energy in those parts gets stagnant. But if you give them some interest, breathe freely through those parts of the body, the pains will go away. Or sometimes the pain is related to a blockage in your breath energy in another part of the body. When I was first meditating, I found that my knees would get sore pretty fast. Sometimes my legs would go numb. But then I realized there was a blockage in the breath energy flowing down my spine. And if I could release that blockage, the pain in the knees and numbness in the legs would go away. Because you suddenly got interested in the body. When the body feels uncomfortable, to what extent is it caused by the way you breathe? To what extent is it caused by how well the breath energy flows in the body? And is it a problem with the breath energy right there where the pain or the blockage is felt? Or is it someplace else? So there’s plenty you can survey in the body. And begin to realize that the present moment is a lot more interesting than you thought. And that’s just the body. Because after all, the Buddha says that the reason we’re suffering is because of things we’re doing in the present moment in the mind. We suffer because of our craving. We suffer in our clinging. And those are things you can see. Sometimes you cling to your sense of the body. Sometimes you cling to feelings. Feelings are pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Sometimes you cling to your perceptions. The images and labels you use to identify things. That’s when you see a stoplight. The light is red. One, you know that it’s red. That’s a perception. Two, you know what it means. That also is a perception. And then three, you notice how important it is. You really do have to pay attention to that red light. Because there are other red lights, other places that don’t mean stop. But this one means stop, and it is important. Those are all different types of sannyā or perception. We have a perception of who we think we are. What we identify with. What happens when you drop those perceptions? Then there are thought constructs, thought fabrications. The senses with which we talk to ourselves. Like you’re talking to yourself right now. Are you talking to yourself about the breath or are you talking about something else? How about talking about the breath and talking about the way your mind is related to the breath? Your awareness is related to the breath. And keep that conversation going until you don’t need it anymore, when the mind settles down. As John Fogan said, it was like raising a water buffalo. He was born in a farming family. He was in charge of looking after the water buffalo. So when the buffalo would come, he would call it by name. Then when it came, he said, “Oh, you don’t have to call it anymore.” It’s the same with the mind as you’re settling down with the breath. In the beginning, you have to talk to yourself about the breath. How does the breath feel? Is it long? Is it too long? Too short? Too heavy? Too light? Too fast? Too slow? What happens if you adjust the breath in different ways? What way is the most comfortable? Those are things you can talk about. Then once the breath is comfortable, how do you maintain that sense of comfort? How do you let it spread to the body? When you finally work out the different blockages in the body so the breath feels good everywhere, then the conversation gets less and less and less, until you don’t need much conversation anymore. All you have to do is stay with the perception of breath. Then there’s your awareness of these things. All the aggregates are right here. In the beginning, we use them to create a good state of concentration. Then when the concentration is solid, we can begin to let them go. So as you can see, there’s a lot to be interested in here. There’s a lot going on. Even as you try to get the mind as still as possible, there are different things happening with the breath, different things happening in the mind that you have to get sensitive to first, and then you calm it down. And in doing that, you learn two lessons. The Buddha was right. This state of concentration is one of the best things that you can fabricate, one of the best things you can make happen here in the present moment. But too, you also see that it has its limitations. Remember, it’s just part of the path. And the Buddha’s image for the path, of course, is the raft. They’re going to take you across this dangerous river to safety on the other side. Where you are is dangerous. The river going across is dangerous. But you have trees with branches and leaves and twigs and vines. You combine them together from the material on this side of the river to make a raft, and you can use that raft to take you across. Then we get to the other side, then you can let it go. That’s what we’re doing here. We’re taking branches and leaves from our ordinary mental activity and making them into a state of concentration. We’re making a raft. And then we’re beginning to go across the river. While you’re on the river, you hold on. Don’t let go until you’re totally safe. Because the river has its dangers. Dangers of wrong views, dangers of you hanging on even to right views sometimes. The dangers of sensuality, the dangers of ignorance. But you have to hold on to resist these things. So hold on to your breath. Take an interest in your breath. Realize how important it is that you develop these qualities in the mind. Because as life goes on, your body gets weaker. And even though there may be things you know that you should be doing, if you haven’t made them part of your habits, it’s going to get harder and harder to do them. But if you’ve been developing good habits all through your life, the mind will tend to go in those directions, even as the body gets weaker and weaker. So as you meditate, you’re showing that you do have a strong sense of heedfulness, that there are dangers in the mind that you have to watch out for. But there are also potentials in the mind that you can develop that can take you to safety. It’s that combination of a sense of danger but confidence that you can deal with those dangers. That’s what goes into a heedfulness. Because if there were nothing but dangers, if there were no safety at all, there’d be no reason to try to be heedful. Because no matter what you did, no matter what you thought or said, you would all end up in danger. If there were no dangers at all, there would be no need for heedfulness either. Everything would be safe. The problem is we live in a world where there are dangers and potential islands of safety. And our actions are going to make a difference between whether we stay in that flood that will carry us along, or we stay on that raft that takes us over to the other side. The total safety. So what this means is that you have to believe in the power of your actions. And that there is a possibility that you could misuse that power, but there’s also the possibility that you could use that power to find the ultimate happiness. We human beings have this potential within us. These potentials both for good and for bad. Which means that we have to be sensitive to the dangers that we pose. It’s not just that there are dangers out there. We create dangers from within. But also be sensitive to the good parts of the mind. That you do have a potential for mindfulness. You do have a potential for being alert. You have a potential to put forth more energy. And where are you going to find these potentials? By working on them right now. If you sense the importance of right now, then there’s hope for all your good qualities to develop. Because it’s the heedfulness of the importance right now. That forms the basis for all the other good qualities in the mind. The potential for them to develop as far as they can go.

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