Lift Your Mind

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The Buddha’s basic instructions for concentration practice are found in his description of right mindfulness. You’re doing two things. One, you’re giving the mind a focal point, a theme to stick with, and then two, you’re putting aside all other thoughts. He describes the focal point as being focused on the body, and then of itself. In other words, how you experience the body right here, right now, and not in the context of the world. In other words, you’re not concerned about how healthy it is, how strong it is, how good-looking it is. Just what it’s like to have a body right here, without thinking about the body being in the world, without thinking about its being involved in any narratives. Just what you’ve got right here, right now. That’s what you put aside. The Buddha says it’s putting aside grief and distress with reference to the world. In other words, anything about the world right now that would give rise to greed or distress with reference to the world. Anything that would give rise to greed right now, anything that would give rise to distress, put it aside. You’ve got more important work to do. There are a lot of things that the world wants out of you, but there are a lot of things that the world cannot do for you. You’ve got to do for yourself. So this is time to do those things. And then you bring three qualities of mind. You’re mindful. In other words, you keep in mind what you’ve got to do, which is to stay with the breath. Watch the breath coming in, going out all the way in, all the way out, each breath. Center your attention there. The Buddha doesn’t say that you focus on any particular part of the body, but wherever the breath is obvious, you have sensations that tell you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” Stay with those sensations. Again, there’s no narrative here. There’s no other context, just being with the breath. And then you’re alert. On the one hand, you’re alert to make sure that the mind actually does stay with the breath. And you’re alert to what’s going on in the breath, what’s going on in the mind that might pull them apart. And then you’re ardent. You’re trying to do this well. It’s the ardency that makes the mindfulness right, makes the alertness right. Because you can be mindful about all kinds of things, alert about all kinds of things. But in terms of ardent, you want to do what’s skillful for the mind. In other words, what will have good long-term consequences. You’re here in the present moment, but you’re doing this not only for the present moment, but for its long-term benefits. When the Buddha talks about the present moment, it’s amazing that so much is made of the Buddha’s focus on the present moment, but he doesn’t talk about it that much in the Canon. And when he does talk about it, it’s in the context of the fact that death could happen at any time, and there’s work you’ve got to do before you die. And if you don’t do it now, when are you going to do it? So you focus on now. And in the now, of course, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world and you stay right here with the breath coming in, going out. Because right here with the breath is where the body and the mind meet. And you’re going to see a lot about the mind, and you’ll see a lot about the body going on. This gives you a good perspective. And if you make the breath comfortable, it’s easier to stay with these things. Because as life goes on, what happens to the body? There’s aging, there’s illness, there’s death. And in the mind, of course, there are all kinds of memories, all kinds of intentions, some focused on the past, some focused on the future. And you’ve got to learn how not to be blown away by those things. The Ajahns in Thailand will often say that as you’re meditating, you’re learning precisely the skills you’re going to need as you age, grow ill, and die. Number one, of course, is being mindful. And learn how to insert some control over your mind so it doesn’t go wandering off into places that would cause you to suffer, like greed and distress with reference to the world. A lot of that has to do with the narratives of your life. That’s not the case that you drop all narratives, but you nurture the narratives that can bring you back here to the present moment, realizing that this is the important place to be. This is where you’re going to see things and understand things. So any narrative you have that says, “In my life I did this, I did that, but then I came to my senses and realized that I had to get my mind in order.” Well, here you are. And as for the world, a lot of your concern is about the world. But this is the primary thing when you’re facing death, is not to be worried about your responsibilities in the world, or worried about anything in the world at all. As it passes me, he talks to one of his cousins. The Buddha is going to be leaving after the rains retreat. He’s going to go off on a wandering tour with a lot of monks. And his cousin, who’s a layperson but is also a stream-enterer, asks him, “What do I do if someone here in the town where I live is going to die?” Because usually he would go to the Buddha, have the Buddha talk to the person. But now he was going to have to do it himself. The Buddha said, “The first thing you do is ask the person, ‘Are you worried? Worried about yourself? Worried about your family? If you’re dying, you have to put those worries aside.’” This is going to be a huge skill that you have to develop, because the mind goes immediately to things that it’s concerned about, the things it’s going to leave behind, the people it’s concerned about. And you have to realize, at that point, you’ve got work that you’ve got to do that no one else can do for you. Some people say, “Well, if I die, I just die, and that’s the end of the problem.” It’s not. It’s a transition. It’s not the end. It’s the end of a chapter, but it’s not the end of the book. So you make that transition smooth. You realize that whatever responsibilities you have in the world right now, you’ve got to put them aside. And if the person could put the worries aside, then the next question is, “Are you concerned about leaving the body? Are you concerned about leaving the pleasures of the human realm?” And if the person says, “Yes,” then you remind the person that there are better pleasures in the heavenly realms. And there are realms where there is no war, there is no genocide, where there is no starvation. And it’s a lot easier to practice, to set your mind on those worlds. And then you would have them imagine the various worlds going up through the different heavens, finally to the Brahma realms, where the Brahmins are those who are meditating. They get their minds into good absorption. Set your mind there. Don’t worry about sensual pleasures. This is one of the things that really hits at the time of death, or even at the time of illness. You think about all the sensual pleasures you used to be able to enjoy, and you can’t enjoy them anymore. You have to realize that this is not so much of a loss. You’ve got these qualities of concentration and mindfulness that you’ve been developing all along. You find a sense of well-being there, and it’s a lot more reliable. It lifts the mind higher. This is a lot of what the Buddha is trying to tell you. To lift your mind. This is one of the reasons why we bow down here. Also one of the reasons why the Dhamma is not for sale. We live in a world where there’s so much consumerism. And a lot of people come to the Dhamma thinking, “Well, it’s something else they consume.” And their attitude towards consumption is that, “If it appeals to me, I’ll buy it. And if it doesn’t appeal to me, I won’t bother.” But the Dhamma is not for sale. It’s not a commodity. You have to make yourself worthy of the Dhamma. And in doing that, you lift the quality of your mind. So practice lifting the quality of your mind right now. The events of the world are what the world is going to do. What does the world have? It has gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. That’s it. Whereas the Dhamma offers you much more. There is a possibility for happiness that doesn’t have to depend on conditions. So set your sights higher. That way when death comes to the body, the mind doesn’t have to be fazed. Even when aging and illness come, it doesn’t have to be fazed. Because it realizes it has something better inside. And where does that something better come from? The Buddha’s analogy for mindfulness practice, concentration practice, is that you have an island in a flood. The river is rising. The river is strong. But you’ve got an island that’s above the river. And you’re safe. So this is how you create a refuge for yourself that aging can’t touch, that illness can’t touch, that death can’t touch. But you’ve got to do it. You’ve got to do the work. And where are you going to do it? You do it right here. When are you going to do it? It’s best to do it right now. So remember the two activities. On the one hand, you give your mind a good thing to focus on. And then two, anything that has to do with greed or distress, with reference to the world, just put it aside. Tell yourself it’s not your business right now. Your business is getting your mind under control. Because this is the basic message of the Buddhist teachings. There is a skill that can be developed. But each of us has to develop for him or herself. No one else can make you skillful. You’re the one who has to learn from trial and error, and being really observant, that you can really lift the quality of your mind. The Buddha’s image for discernment is a person who climbs a tower, looks down on the people below. And looking down doesn’t mean looking down in terms of despising them or having disdain for them, but just sees what’s going on. But with a sense of being separate, seeing the larger patterns that are hard to see when you’re down on the same level with everybody else. So lift your mind. Make yourself worthy of the Dhamma. And in doing so, the Dhamma will protect you.

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