Calm

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When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, he starts with mindfulness. You remember why you’re here. You’re here to find happiness that’s harmless. And you’re going to meditate for two reasons. One is to gain some peace of mind, some calm. And the other is to gain insight. See things clearly and start asking the right questions. And the Buddha has you start with the factors for awakening that are more energizing. Analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture or refreshment. Because as the mind calms down, if you start out calming it down, it’s very easy to put yourself to sleep. So first you have to energize yourself. Thinking about the work that needs to be done. We’re not here just to rest. We’re also here to figure out what in the mind is skillful so we can develop it and what is unskillful so that we can let it go. That requires some discernment right from the beginning. The Buddha is basically showing you in these factors for awakening how you move from mindfulness into concentration. There has to be some insight. There has to be some appropriate attention asking the right questions. And when you figure out what your mind is doing that’s skillful and what’s not, then you can move on to persistence. Put forth the effort to encourage what’s skillful, discourage what’s not. There should come a sense of refreshment as you’re able to do that. That refreshment is your food for the practice. It gives you energy. It’s your energy drink. Some people have it in a very mild form. Other people have it in a very strong form. Refreshed. Alert. Active. Energized. You’ve got off to a good start. Then you come to the factor of calm. Once the body’s been energized, you want it to calm down. When the mind has been energized, you want it to calm down. Because it’s when it’s calm, that’s when you can see things clearly. And when we calm things down, it’s not just a matter of deflating the energy that we’ve amassed so far. Because after all, to get the mind into good concentration, you have to be glad you’re here. So there has to be a sense of refreshment. But you want to be more focused. Less scattered around than it has been. If you’re going to calm the mind, calm the body, you have to realize the extent to which you fabricate your experience of mind and body. In other words, influences come in from your past karma, and you shape them into how you’re experiencing your body, how you’re experiencing your mind right now. So you are playing a role. It’s not just that you have to put up with whatever’s there. You have to look into, well, how am I shaping this in a way that’s not as good as it could be? So right now, how do I shape it in a way that calms things down? And the main shaper of the body, the Buddha said, is your in-and-out breath. So, what kind of breathing would calm you down? You might try in short and out long to calm you down. Or in short, out short. You can think of the breath coming in very easily. You don’t have to pull it in very hard. In fact, you don’t have to pull it in at all. Just allow things to flow smoothly and freely inside the body. Think of all the energy channels in your body opening up. So whatever movement of breath there is, it goes easily. You don’t have to push the breath or pull the breath. It flows on its own. It’s like when you dig a ditch, and there’s water running down the ditch, and then you dig another ditch up to the side. You don’t have to push the water into the side ditch. The water goes on its own. So you open up the channels in the body, and the breath will flow. And the fact that it flows smoothly makes things more calm. You might even get to the point where the breath seems to stop. Not because you’re forcing it to stop or because you’re suppressing it. It’s just that the breath energy in the body seems full enough that you don’t feel any need to breathe. It’s actually painful to breathe sometimes when the mind is settled down like this. You need to calm down. As long as you still feel the need to breathe, keep on breathing. But if it feels laborious to breathe, you can stop. Don’t worry about fainting or anything. Because if the body needs to breathe, it will breathe. That’s how you calm the body down. As for calming the mind, the Buddha says the two things that shape the mind are feelings and perceptions. So you try to breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of ease, feelings of pleasure, to give some energy, to help make sure that you’re glad to be here. Because as I said, the Buddha said one of the important parts of having the mind in concentration is that it has to be glad to be here. If it’s not glad to be here, it’s going to go off someplace else. But if it feels good inside, you realize that what you’re doing here is something good. Then you create a feeling of well-being in the mind. And John Swatt used to emphasize this point a lot. He said when you start meditating, try to develop an attitude of conviction, an attitude of confidence, that what you’re doing here is really good work. So if any voices come into the mind saying there are things you have to do right now or things you would rather do right now, you have to say no to them. And to say no to them effectively, you have to feel really good about being here. So part of that is, of course, making the breath feel good. And the other part is making sure that you have some bright view about what you’re doing. If the mind is worried about the future, tell it. You don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know whatever happens, you’re going to need mindfulness, you’re going to need alertness, you’re going to need to use the powers of concentration and discernment. And where are you going to get those? Well, by focusing on the breath. So come on back. Perceptions like that calm the mind down. Feelings like that calm the mind down. As for perceptions, look at how you perceive the breath. What images do you have in mind as the breath comes in, as the breath goes out? Where is it coming in? When it comes into the body, where does it flow? When it goes out, where does it go? And try to make sure you have a perception that it’s very easy to breathe. This is one of the reasons why we think of the breath as a whole body process. Because if you just think of the breath coming in and out through the nose, those are two very tiny holes. And to get the breath through those two tiny holes into the whole body takes a lot of energy. But if you tell yourself the breath is waiting at every pore, happy to come in, if you just let it in. That perception changes things. So you’re calming the mind, sometimes thinking about reasons why you should be here. Use those perceptions. And then sometimes use the perception of what’s going on in the body, what’s going on in the mind right now, to help calm you down. So you’re not just suppressing things to calm them down. You give the mind and the body a sense of refreshment first. And when they’ve been well refreshed, then it’s very natural for them to rest. So we give them a good place to rest. But you’re always alert. You’re not resting to the point of falling asleep. You’re alert. You’re mindful. And you’re ardent to try to see even the slightest bit of stress, slightest bit of disturbance, either in the body or in the mind. And try to figure out what to do about that. So you can let it go too. This way the mind gets more and more calm. It moves more and more into concentration. Calm basically is a quality of ease and well-being. The concentration is when you’re really focused. Things are very solidly centered right here. And they’re going to be centered well because you’ve created a good place to be. Through the way you breathe, through the feelings you focus on, and the feelings you create, and the perceptions you create. Again, it’s not this case that you have to just put up with whatever you have. You’re using these things already, perceptions and feelings, the way you breathe, to shape your experience. So it’s simply a matter of learning how to do it well. Do it in a way that makes the mind inclined to want to be more calm. Inclined to be more centered. As I was saying this morning, the Buddha said there is no happiness other than peace. This is the direction we go. You force the mind. You don’t really force the mind to be peaceful. You give it good reason to be peaceful. You’re satisfied with good breath energy. You’re satisfied with good ways of talking to yourself, good ways of perceiving what’s going on in the breath, going on in the body, going on in the mind. The mind will want to settle down, settle down with a sense of ease. Are there any voices in the mind that are not inclined to ease? Well, remind yourself. And here’s another perception. Your mind is like a committee. Lots of different people in there. And you don’t have to listen to every voice that comes up in the mind. For right now, listen to the voices that are in line with the Dhamma. As for the other voices, you can ignore them. If you stay in line with the Dhamma, then you’re on the path in the right direction, the path to the end of suffering. It’s a good path to be on.

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