Joy of Meditation, The

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An important principle in training the mind is to have a sense of how you can create a sense of comfort right here, right here in the present moment, because the mind doesn’t usually like to stay here. It likes to wander off to other places. And one of the reasons it wanders is because it doesn’t feel at ease right here. It either gets bored, or there’s a sense of tension, or just a sense of general dis-ease. So we have to learn how to relate to the present moment in a way that we feel comfortable with it. And you work on it from two sides. One is working on the breath. It’s not that we just let the breath come in and out any old way. You have the choice. You have the power to make it come in and out comfortably if you’re observant, if you spend time with it. This is an extremely important principle in the meditation. Sometimes we think, “Well, aren’t we just here to see things as they arise and as they pass away on their own?” Well, you watch things arising and passing away without any sense of cause and effect. You don’t gain any insight. And what’s the best way to get a sense of cause and effect? Well, you change the causes. Try breathing this way for a while. Try breathing that way for a while. And you begin to get a sense not only of how the breath affects your sense of the present moment, but also how the mind can have an effect on the breath, in its choice of what feels good at any one point, in its conception of what it means to breathe in and breathe out. What does the body do when it’s breathing in and breathing out? Where does the breath feel like it’s coming in? Where does the sensation of the in-breath start? Does one part of the body have to pull the breath in through other parts of the body? Or do they all allow the breath to come in? What’s the most comfortable way of conceiving of your breathing? When you open up these questions, you’ll find there’s just lots to explore right here. And for a mind that likes to explore, this is a great place to do it. You suddenly see all the little habits that you had that you tended to overlook in the past. They suddenly get writ large. And you see that you can change them. This is the basic principle of the Buddha’s teachings, that developing a skill is possible. In one of his shortest and most basic discourses, he says, “Develop what is skillful. If it were not possible to develop what is skillful, I wouldn’t say to do it. If it weren’t beneficial to develop what is skillful, I wouldn’t say to do it. But it is possible, and it is beneficial.” It’s a basic, basic principle, and we tend to forget it. It’s like the story of the professional tennis player whose game went into a slump. For months, he couldn’t figure out what was going wrong. His managers changed his trainers. And after months of trying to figure out what was wrong with his game, one day he finally realized he wasn’t keeping his eye on the ball. That’s the number one rule in playing tennis. And it’s the same with meditation. Those number one rules are important, not just so that you can learn them and move on to something else. You learn them because you have to practice them all the time. Always keep them in mind. It’s central to the Buddhist teaching that it is possible to develop a skill. So you think about how you develop skills. While you’re observant, you try things out. If something doesn’t work, you use your ingenuity to try something else. Have a strong sense of what you’re doing. Because the Buddhist teachings on karma say that you’re experiencing the present moment. It’s not just past karma. There’s also present karma. Without that present karma, you wouldn’t experience the present moment. There’s an element of intention with every experience. What is that intention? Can you ferret it out? It’s so much in the background many times that we hardly notice it. You focus on the breath, you begin to see the mind as well, how the mind acts in the present moment. John Lee compares the breath to a mirror. The way your breath is going is oftentimes an indication of how the mind is going. So first you want to make the breath into a good, clear and smooth and flat mirror so it gives accurate reflections. In other words, you want the breath to be comfortable. A sense of ease coming in and going out. Sometimes this might be long breathing. Other times, if long breathing puts you to sleep, you might want to try shorter breathing. Try to find the proper rhythm, the proper texture. Keep yourself alert and at ease at the same time. If it doesn’t seem quite right, just stick with it. These bases of power that the Buddha talked about as being essential to practicing any kind of concentration, there has to be the desire to do it. You find it interesting. Secondly, there has to be persistence. You just stick with it. You have to really be intent in what you’re doing. Pay careful attention. Finally, you have to use your ingenuity. When things don’t work, you try new approaches. These basic principles are basic to all skills. So as you approach the meditation, think back on other skills that you’ve mastered in the past. The attitude you have to bring to it, the persistence, and the joy. Make the meditation something you like doing. After all, it is your breath. It is your present moment. Do what you can to make it a good place to stay. Don’t let yourself be intimidated by it. Think of it as learning a skill, the same way little kids pick up a guitar. They strum here and they strum there and make a lot of racket. Just kind of playing around with the guitar, after all, they begin to get a sense of it. Then they start getting good at it. So play around with the breath. See what you can do with the breathing. Think of the breath coming in and out the spaces between your toes. Think of it coming in and out the spaces between your fingers, the base of the spine, any place you can think of. See what that does to your sense of the body. See if you can find certain ways that you might not have expected, which really do feel good, which really do help you to stay in the present moment a lot more consistently. John Foon used to say, “Play with the breath.” But he wasn’t just playing around in a desultory way. He meant playing at it the same way that Michael Jordan plays basketball, or Yo-Yo Ma plays the cello. You enjoy it, and then you really want to get good at it so you can enjoy it even more. If you have that kind of attitude towards the meditation, that kind of focus, that kind of sense of affinity with the meditation, it makes it go a lot more easily. So when the question comes of how you can take the meditation off the cushion and into your daily life, it becomes more and more a question of how can you take the enjoyment of meditation and bring it into your life, rather than making it a task, making it a chore. You get a sense of feeling at ease with the breath in the present moment, so it feels good to be with the breath. Then you want to take that sense of feeling good with you. So the meditation, the mindfulness, doesn’t come with a sense of being constricted or being confined. It comes with a sense of enjoyment. And it’s in that way that it grows.

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