Getting to Know the Breath

December 18, 2003

Okay, focus your attention on the breath. As far as you’re concerned, there doesn’t have to be anything else right now. Just the sensation of the breath coming in and going out. As for your other concerns, you can put them aside. Give the mind some space just to be with itself right here. And to be with something friendly and comforting, which is the breath. After all, the breath is what keeps the body and the mind together. It’s what keeps you alive. So be on good terms with the breath. Sometimes when we focus on a meditation object and it seems difficult, after a while it seems to become an enemy. Try not to let that attitude get in the way. After all, the breath is here to help you. Meditating is learning how to make use of what it has to offer. It can provide a home for the mind, a good comfortable place to stay in the present moment. It can provide food for the mind, a good energizing presence in the present moment. Food, clothing, shelter, medicine—the breath can provide all these things for the mind if you get to know it well. That’s the problem. We live with the breath and yet we don’t know the breath. As a result, we don’t get as much use out of the breath as we could. So whatever other chatter may be going on in the mind, you don’t have to pay any attention to it. Just be with the sensation of the breath and allow that sensation to be comfortable. Comfortable coming in, comfortable going out, comfortable between going in and going out. The breath coming in and out the whole body. Cleaning out any cobwebs that may be in the present moment. After all, you’re going to move in here as your home. There’s probably a cleaning up job that has to be done. Allow the breath to fill the whole body, coming in, the whole body coming out. Any tension or tightness that seems to get in the way, just allow it to relax, allow it to dissolve away. Then with each breath as it comes, just try to get to know it. Because each breath as it comes will come differently. There’ll be a slight variation if you’ve been breathing in a tense way and then start breathing in a comfortable way. The first few comfortable breaths will feel one way, and then after a while the needs of the body will change. So try to be in touch with that. Stay firmly with this physical sensation of the breathing coming in and going out right now. There will be thoughts in the background. That’s normal. But you don’t have to pay any attention to them. You don’t have to give them any reality. You don’t have to give them any importance. Think of the importance of the breath instead. After all, it’s the force of life. The more comfortable this force is, the better it’s going to be, both for the body and for the mind. If you didn’t have any breath, all your thoughts would be meaningless. Plans for the future, memories of the past, there’d be nothing there. So try to hold on to the breath for the hour. Have a strong sense that this is the most important thing you can do right now, straightening out the way the mind relates to the body in the present moment. If this doesn’t get straightened out, then it doesn’t matter how much you straighten out other things. There’ll still be this sense of dis-ease, a sense of having no place to settle down. You can build a wonderful house. You can have a wonderful family. But if inside things are not at peace, things are not at harmony, then that wonderful house, that wonderful family, doesn’t mean very much. They can’t reach in inside and solve these problems. The problems have to be solved from within, as the mind relates to the breath coming in and going out. That’s how you resolve the problems, from the inside going out. So no matter what other thoughts may come into the mind right now, you don’t have to pay them any attention. Don’t give them any importance, as I said. Make the breath your top priority. You need to know this energy here in the present moment and what it can be used for. Notice how the breath affects the body. What does long breathing do to the body? Try it for a while and see. What does short breathing do to the body? Try that, too. Or in long and out short. In short, out long. Deep, shallow, heavy, light. You can experiment with these things and see both how they affect the body and how they affect the mind. Then when you’ve found a rhythm and a depth and a texture of breath that you like, just stay with it. If you don’t like it anymore, you can change. There’s total freedom right here. This is one way of showing real goodwill for yourself right here in the present moment. That chant we had just now, “May I Be Happy,” is what you do to become happy. The Buddha once said, “The beginning of wisdom is when you ask the question, ‘What, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?’” This is one of those things that leads to long-term welfare and happiness. After all, life involves so much effort. Wisdom lies in learning how to use that effort to get the best results. It’s like knowing where to invest your money. If you invest it with a fly-by-night organization, well, it’s going to fly away at night with your money. If you invest with something solid and reliable, then you’ll have good long-term benefits. It’s the same with the breath. The breath is always going to be here. As long as you’re alive, there’s going to be the breath coming in and going out. So it’s wise to invest right here. Think of the pleasures of last year or the pleasures of the year before. Where are they now? Think of your thoughts last year. How many of those thoughts actually came to any reality and had any effect, any good effect, on your life? Very few. But the breath, which was here last year, is here right now. If you had spent time with the breath last year, you’d be benefiting right now, having a greater sense of familiarity. So when you’re thinking about long-term happiness in the future, a good place to invest is right here, right now. Because this doesn’t fly away anywhere. It stays right here. So as you’re staying with the breath, try to develop a sense of the importance of the breath. That helps. It motivates you to look into the breath and start learning more about it. Once you start learning more about it, you find that it’s really fascinating. There are all kinds of things that can happen with the way the breath energy flows in the body. The more you see, the more you want to explore. So for the rest of the hour, you’ve got a whole hour here to explore this part of your awareness, which normally gets closed off, normally gets shut off, normally gets pushed into the background. And as a result, the thing that’s closest to you is oftentimes the thing that’s least familiar. Now is a chance to develop some familiarity. Get on good terms with this territory of the present moment. Once you’re on good terms with the present moment, then wherever you are, you’re on good terms. Because the present moment is all there is. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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