Insight from the Breath

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When you focus on the breath, you’re laying a foundation, and you want that foundation to be solid. You realize the importance of what you’re going to be placing on the foundation. So however long it takes to make the foundation solid, you’re willing to give time to it. That’s the attitude that gets results in the meditation. Otherwise, we’re running up ladders that aren’t leaning against anything, that aren’t really firmly based. And when you run up a ladder like that, you fall down. So one of the important qualities we have to learn in the practice is patience and also a sense of loyalty to our meditation. You focus on the breath and you make that your home. You stay there. You don’t go flitting off after other things. No matter how important they may seem or insightful they may seem, for the time being, this is your job. Just being right here with the breath, getting to know this area of your awareness. Often it’s something we overlook. We do a little concentration practice and then want to go straight to insight, because after all, that’s where all the flashing lights are. All the really neat things we’re going to learn about ourselves and all the problems we’re going to solve. But you have to remember the breath and the awareness that gets stable with the breath. Those are the means for solving the problems. If you drop them, you’ve dropped the means. Then you just go back to your ordinary mode of analysis, thinking this, thinking that. The type of insight that’s going to make a real difference in the mind has to come from a good, solidly based mind. So this is where you want to stay. And the insights that come as you’re working with the breath itself may not seem much, but they build up over time. And it’s only as the concentration develops that it can give bigger insights, deeper insights. It’s like having a goose that lays golden eggs. You start out and it lays these little tiny golden eggs because it’s only a tiny little goose. And you get impatient and you kill the goose to find out where that gold is coming from. And that’s the end of the gold. So even though it may seem like just little tiny pellets of gold there, you can do a lot with little pellets of gold over time. And that’s precisely the kind of insight you need right now. This process of staying with the breath interferes with a lot of different defilements. And simply getting over those defilements to stay with the breath gives you a lot of insight right there. It may seem very particular. This particular defilement has to be treated that way. That one has to be treated this way. Simply the skill of fending them off, sidestepping, avoiding problems when you can. It’s not cutting the defilements off at the root, but it’s trimming them back. And it’s giving you practice in taking on these parts of the mind that seem to have a will of their own. They’re going to go off someplace else. So have an appreciation for that concentration as we chanted just now, with respect for concentration. Stay right here. Get to know right here. Don’t look down on the simple process of staying with the breath, because it can do an awful lot. And even though it may seem like you’re just sitting here having fun with the breath, what’s wrong with that? That’s how great guitarists come. They just fool around with the guitar for a while. In the beginning, the music that comes out of the guitar may not seem much, but they’re getting more and more used to it, and they’re developing a real close relationship to the guitar. It’s that closeness of the relationship that’s what’s going to make good music come out someday. So you want to develop a good, close relationship with your breath. Learn to appreciate the breath. As Ajaan Lee once said, “Our problem is that we see high Dharma as low and low Dharma as high.” The ability to bring the mind, the breath, and keep it with the breath is called a superior human attainment. When you really get absorbed in the breath, it brings the mind to a heightened level. That’s an important ability. That’s an important skill. And as for all the great insights we’re going to get someday, a lot of times when we think about them beforehand, it’s just ordinary old thinking, which, even though it may be thinking about big matters, comes down to something a lot less. So what you’ve got here is the foundation, or you can think of it as tools, the tools you’re going to need. John Fergman said, “The basis of all we’re going to be doing requires skill with the breath.” So the time you spend with the breath is not wasted time. You’re not here just fooling around while more important issues have to be worked on. The issues that come up for you to sidestep while you’re staying with the breath, the ability to sidestep them is an important skill. Because you’ll find as you start dealing with other issues, as the breath gets more solid, and you can take on some of the other issues that come up in the mind, that there come periods when you’ve done all you can with the issue for that particular period of time, and you’ve been hacking away at it, and your life is getting dull, and you’ve just got to drop it and come back to the breath. Or some lines of analysis, instead of really helping you, actually can be harmful. And you have to learn how to recognize that, and then again and again, drop it. And the ability to drop things, return to the breath, is an important skill. Because in those times, some of those insights are going to seem really intriguing, really amazing. And it takes good power as a concentration to say, “No, this is not the time or the place for that,” and you come back to the breath. Now, there will be times as you meditate that you can’t stay with the breath. That’s when you pull out other meditation topics. There are long lists of them. You can think about death as a topic. Mindfulness of death is useful when you’re getting lazy. Contemplation of the body is good for all kinds of things. Cutting away lust. When you’re angry at somebody, you can just think about their different body parts and say, “What’s there? What is there?” to get angry at them. When you’re feeling discouraged, you can think about the member of the Sangha in the past, the noble Sangha, who came from all kinds of backgrounds, had all kinds of problems, but were able to overcome their problems using the same kind of strengths that you have right now, simply through their determination to stick with the path, even when things got tough. They’re human beings. You’re a human being. You can do the work, just like they did. These are ways of thinking that are useful when you can’t settle down. When you find that there is some problem, it’s just really blocking the way. You learn to think these things, think on these topics, until the mind is ready to be with the breath. Then you drop them and come back to the breath, because the breath is your main foundation. The breath is your main tool. The stability that comes from the breath is going to be something you learn to take more and more as a refuge. When you find you can stay with the breath, stay there. Keep working with it, because there’s a lot to learn. Even if the breath itself doesn’t show much, you find there’s a lot to learn simply about the nature of the mind as it focuses on an object and as it learns how to stay with an object, how it learns how to fend off boredom, how it learns how to fend off monkey mind so it doesn’t identify with the rest of the world. It identifies with the ones that will pull it away, even the ones that come and seem to be teaching Dharma lessons, but actually destroy your concentration. This is the area you want to develop as much as possible. Until this is really solid, this is where you want to focus all your efforts. Other topics of meditation are useful, as I said, when you can’t get to the breath. But once you’re here with the breath, you can drop them. You really get unfamiliar terms with the breath. Remember, the breath is your friend. It’s been keeping you alive all this time. It’s because of the breath energy in the body that you can move it, that you can do things with the body. So it only makes sense to get really good, friendly terms and hang out with the breath. Get to know it. Even though it may seem dumb, sometimes you’re sitting here just being very still, still, still with the breath, still but alert. But you’re not doing a lot of analysis. The mind isn’t being clever. And it’s going to start complaining that this is dumb. And you say, “Well, I don’t care. This is where I’m going to stay right now.” Uncover a lot of hidden agendas behind it. This is how we get to know the hidden agendas of the mind, by simply resisting them. And they start showing their true colors. So have some respect for the breath. Stick with it as much as you can. Observe it. Spend time with it. As the Buddha said, this is how you get to know somebody, is you have to spend time with them and watch, be observant. So if you develop this kind of respectful friendship here, it’s going to repay you many times over. And all the time that’s spent with it is time not wasted. You may hear that you’re not supposed to get stuck on conflict. You’ve got to hurry on to insight. The Buddha never talked about the dangers of concentration. He said it’s the path, it’s the heart of the path. Whenever he told the monks to go out meditating, he didn’t say, “Go out and do vipassana.” He said, “Go do jhana. Go practice mental absorption, which is good, solid concentration.” And as you get the mind into good, solid concentration, it’s not just a mental matter of blacking things out. To get it there and to keep it there requires a certain kind of insight. And those are the insights that form the basis for the more subtle ones. So however long it takes, that’s not the issue. You’re just simply staying here right now. This breath, this breath, this breath right here. Notice this breath right here. And don’t fall for any thoughts that come in to try to pull you away. Because those thoughts are never really going to be your friends. They pull you away and then they run away. But the breath is always here, and it’s a friendship that’s really worth cultivating.

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