Staying Power

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There’s a passage in the novel Joseph and His Brothers by Thomas Mann where Joseph has been thrown into prison. He spends his time telling stories, first to himself, then to the other prisoners. He starts interpreting people’s dreams for them. Eventually, it’s because of that that he gets taken out of the prison and taken to the pharaoh to interpret the pharaoh’s dreams about the seven fat cows and the seven lean cows. Thomas Mann makes an interesting comment, as Joseph is telling stories to the other prisoners. It’s a sign of a civilized person that he’s able to keep himself entertained, even in the worst of circumstances. Not only himself, but the people around him. Not only entertained, he’s able to use his mind to good purpose, even in the worst of circumstances. That’s what allows him not only to endure his time in prison, but ultimately it’s the key to getting him out. That’s something to think about as we’re meditating, that we’re in here for the long haul, with the breath. One of the things we have to develop is staying power, the ability to stick with it no matter what happens inside, no matter what happens outside. We’re able to make the best of our circumstances because we have to look at the breath. After all, look at what the breath is doing. It’s bouncing between too much breath energy and too little breath energy in the body. It’s this constant balancing act. As Ajahn Lee once said, “The in-breath is the stress of birth. The out-breath is the stress of death.” There’s stress in the breath all the time. You have to use your ingenuity, you have to use all your powers of observation to get a sense of how to breathe well. Even something as simple as this, if you really want to do it well, takes a lot of attention. It takes a lot of time. But you find that if you invest your mental energy in this process, it makes life better, for you and for the people around you. You find that the breath, instead of simply being the flow of energy in and out of the body that keeps you alive, actually becomes something that you can use as a home base for the mind, a dwelling place for the mind, where you can stay with a good, healthy sense of pleasure and well-being. Even though it’s not absolute well-being, it’s enough to get you there, to the absolute well-being. At the same time, when you’re meditating, and meditation is going well, you find it easier to deal with situations that come up around you. In fact, John Lee once made the point that if you find yourself focusing on the bad points of other people, it’s a sign that you’re not paying careful enough attention to your own meditation. At the same time, when your meditation is going well, you’re less likely to want to inflict pain on yourself. And when you’re not inflicting pain on yourself, you’re less likely to inflict it on other people as well. So we’re working on staying power here. You’re going to be with the breath for a long time. You’re going to be with the breath until you die. And so you want to make the most of it. Learn to be on good terms with the breath. Become friends with the breath. It may sound like a strange idea, but then you don’t want to be on bad terms with your breath. You don’t want to be estranged from your breath, because then all kinds of problems can happen. So it’s good to focus some attention, to focus some time on this simple process of breathing in, breathing out, to see what you can make of it. After all, the Buddha followed the breath all the way to awakening. So there’s a lot of potential here. The breath can be a basis not only for concentration, but a basis for insight as well. Think of it as a path that you walk back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and over many times. You really get to know that path. It’s like a truck run that you have. It’s a repeated runs over, for those of you who are truck drivers out there. You really get to know that route very well. And you start noticing things that you would have missed if you went over the route only once. So the more you stay with the breath, the more familiar you get. As John Lee says, it’s like a path that you walk on many times, and it gets more and more worn. The weeds die out. The path becomes clearer. The more often you walk back and forth over the path. When the path is cleared, when all the grass on the path dies out, then there’s no way that snakes are going to leap up at you out of the path, or spring out of the path. Do they say that snakes leap? They jump at you sometimes. And after all, you get to know the plants that grow on the side of the path, the ones you can eat, the ones you can’t eat. The ones that are medicinal. So you get use out of the fact that you’re here with the breath, in and out, in and out, many, many times. So instead of looking at it as drudgery or something that you have to get through to get to something better, the good stuff is right here. There are some Zen teachers that say that the path is the goal. The best way of interpreting that is that you look in the path and you’re going to find the goal in doing the path. Not that you do this part of the path so you get to something better and then something better. The better is right here. It’s simply that you have to learn how to recognize it, get more and more familiar with it. And that takes staying power. Stick to attiveness. Because even when you’re working through the breath, as you were saying this afternoon, to the point where the in-and-out breath seems to stop, you stay with the stillness for a while, and then you work on the sense of space that surrounds and penetrates that stillness. Even when you can do that, you still have to keep coming back to the breath. As Ajaan Lee once said, it’s like when you’re working through the breath, you’re working with the breath. It’s like working and getting a salary. When you drop the breath and start going into the formless states, that’s like living off a pension. And the pension is just all you’ve got. It’s not going to get any bigger, and as inflation hits, it actually gets smaller. But if you’re still working, there’s always a chance of getting more money in the bank. So you go back and you work again. There’s always a lot to explore. You can explore the breath for your whole life and keep finding new things. Not only concerning the breath, you also find out new things about your mind, because once the mind is totally there with the breath, it’s there for you to see clearly how the mind reacts to things, how it focuses on some things, how it latches onto others. You begin to see its habits more and more clearly. Then you see which habits are detrimental, both to you and to the people around you. Then you see how to let go. This is why time spent with the breath is time that leads not only to concentration and tranquility, it also leads to insight and discernment. So as long as you have an in-and-out breath, you’ve got a good place for the mind to stay. Make it your dwelling. Make it your home. And it becomes the kind of home that you can take with you wherever you go. So you’ve always got the breath to fall back on. You’ve always got familiar territory to fall back on. Even arahants, after they gain full awakening, they keep returning to the breath as a comfortable dwelling place for the mind. So what we’re doing here, as we’re making this into our path, is we’re making it into our home. Ultimately, the mind goes to the point where it doesn’t need a home anymore. But until it reaches that point, it’s good to have a good home right here. It’s like your, again, like a trucker. You’ve got your home in the back of the cab. So you make it comfortable. And even when you don’t need a home anymore, it’s there simply for the fun of it. So as you look at each in-and-out breath, don’t think of it as something that you’ve got to squeeze the use out of and then throw away. Think of the breath process as something you really want to get to know. This is where you’re going to hang out. It may not be ideal, but as Thomas Mann said, it’s a sign of a civilized person that you make the best of what you’ve got. As John Lee said, that’s the sign of discernment. Make the best of a bad situation. Make the best of whatever materials you’ve got. You can turn the breath into a home. You can turn the breath into a source for really satisfying, really gratifying well-being. Ultimately, you can turn it into a basis for insight and on into release. So it may not seem like much to begin with, but the more you get to know it, the more you realize it has to offer. It’s like an unassuming person, the person who on first blush doesn’t seem to have much. But the more you get to know him or her, the more you realize there’s a lot of depth.

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