Wise Choices

February 28, 2004

Focus your attention on the breath. When the breath comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. That’s all you have to do. The hard part is just doing that, because the mind tends to want to do a lot of other things. It keeps manufacturing thoughts about this, thoughts about that, and it’s so easy to get carried away with looking into those thoughts. Just getting curious about them, see where they’ll take you. What we’re doing as we’re meditating is to stay with one thing for as long as we can, something that’s always here. The breath is always coming in, always going out, and it’s always right here in the present moment. This is a pretty discouraging chant, but it’s not meant to stop there. It’s just simply to remind you of what reality is. We all want happiness, but many times the things we place our happiness on—age, grow ill, die—we get separated from them. So anything we can do to find happiness is more lasting. That’s what that fifth contemplation is about, reminding ourselves of the power of our own actions. What we do does make a difference in life. And what we do, where does that come from? It comes from the mind. We make choices. Sometimes the choices are wise, and sometimes they’re not. And you want to look into why they are wise. Why are the ones who are not wise? Why are they not wise? It comes down to the quality of the mind making the choice. If the mind is clear, balanced, and doesn’t feel threatened by anything, it tends to make wise choices. When it feels unstable, when it’s clouded, when it’s fearful, it tends to choose the unwise things. So it only makes sense that you want to be wise. You want to train your mind so that it has more clarity, more balance. It’s more solid inside, so it feels less threatened by things. This is why we meditate—to train these qualities in the mind. When the mind does make its choices, it makes them more clearly. In particular, two qualities are important—mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, like you’re keeping the breath in. Keep reminding yourself, “Each time the breath comes in, stay with the breath. Each time it goes out, stay with the breath.” As for alertness, that serves two purposes. One is to be clear about the breath. Does the breath feel comfortable or not? If it doesn’t feel comfortable, you can change it. You’ve got this potential right here, the way the energy flows through your body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. It can flow in ways that are uncomfortable, it can be blocked, or you can find ways that are more comfortable. It’s something you can experiment with. Use your own powers of observation. On the one hand, alertness focuses on the breath. On the other hand, it focuses back on the mind to make sure the mind is staying with the breath and it’s not getting ready to wander off. As you focus on this one simple task, you’re actually developing some important qualities in the mind—mindfulness and alertness—which are the basis for making good choices no matter where you are. Meditating is like going down to the gym. You exercise, your body gets stronger. Well, you don’t leave your stronger body there in the gym. When you go home, you take it with you. That means you have more strength to do things at home, at school, wherever you are. It’s the same with meditation. If you develop mindfulness, develop alertness, develop concentration as you’re sitting here, those qualities can be used as you take them out into your everyday life. This means that you’ll be making better choices, clearer choices, choices that tend more towards happiness than towards pain, that tend more towards lasting happiness rather than a quick fix that then turns into something else. Take the time to get to know your breath. In doing that, you strengthen the mind. Be sensitive to what kind of breathing feels good. Does long breathing feel good now? Try it for a while. See what it feels like. Then you can try shortening it a little bit to see what that feels like. If that doesn’t feel right, then go back to longer breathing, or even longer than what you started out with. You can also work with how deep the breath is. Sometimes deep breathing feels really gratifying, especially when you’re tired. It helps to energize you. Other times, shallow breathing feels better. So you can experiment there as well. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Heavy or light breathing? Fast or slow? There are all kinds of ways you can experiment and play with the breath. As you do that, it develops the strength of your alertness even more. As you watch to see what you’re doing, keep it in mind. Remember, now we’re working with longer breathing, so stick with it for a while. Then see what the results are. That strengthens both mindfulness and alertness. You can focus your attention on any part of the body where it’s easy to detect, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out,” and there’s a sense of ease and comfort. It’s easy for the mind to stay focused on that part. It might be at the nose, it might be at the chest, at the abdomen, any place where you can watch the process of breathing. It’s simple, but it may not be easy. As I said, the mind has this tendency to want to wander away and try other things. It gets bored after a while. Ask yourself, “Who’s bored?” It’s just a thought that came through the mind and you latched onto it. You don’t have to identify with everything that comes into your head. One of the important lessons of meditation is that things come into your head from your past actions, but you have the choice in the present moment whether you want to go with them or not. We spend our whole lives just running after our thoughts. Try to see what it’s like not to run after your thoughts. Stay with a sensation of the breathing right here. When you breathe in, think of the whole body breathing. After all, the entire nervous system is related to the breath. You need your whole body in order to breathe. If you ever saw the film Goldfinger, you may remember the woman who was painted with gold who died after a while because she couldn’t breathe through the pores of her skin. There’s actually an oxygen exchange that’s going on all around your body, and that’s related to the way you breathe. As you breathe in, think of the whole body involved. As you breathe out, the whole body is involved. Try to find a way that feels good, feels gratifying to be here in the present moment. It gives you energy. If you’ve been feeling stressed out or tense, breathe in a way that’s relaxing. If you’re tired, breathe in a way that gives you energy. As you do this, you begin to realize that breath has lots of potentials. It’s a very simple process we have right here, and it can be used for so many things. It’s always there. It’s always yours to draw on. It’s simply a question of getting to know it. As you focus on the breath, it’s not just the ins and outs of the breath, but it’s also the qualities of the ins and the outs. See what they do for the body, what they do for the mind. In some ways of breathing are easier to focus on than others. If you find the mind wandering off, bring it back to the breath. Try to make the breath more interesting, more comfortable, more gratifying, more energizing—whatever it takes to keep the mind interested. Think of this as exploring this uncharted territory inside. If we’ve been with the breath all of our lives and yet we really haven’t been able to notice it, only rarely do we notice it, take some time to really get to know it, because it’s got a lot of potential. After all, it’s what keeps us alive. It only stands to reason that the quality of the breathing should have an effect on the quality of our lives, at the very least the physical health of the body, the sense of mental well-being in the present moment. These are immediately related to the way you breathe. If you really focus your attention here, try to get as sensitive as possible to the breathing, and begin to see more things in the breath. You begin to read the breath. It can tell you when it’s getting too long or when you’ve let it be too short. You get a better and better intuitive sense of what breathing feels good right now, what’s really right for the body, what’s really right for the mind. And in the course of studying the breath, you strengthen the mind, which is the main factor shaping your experience. The way you make choices—the things you choose to do, the things you choose to say, the things you choose to think—these have a big impact on your life. And if the mind is clearer about those choices, it’s going to make better choices. So even though the breath may seem simple, the act of focusing on the breath has lots of implications, both for the physical well-being of the body, and for the well-being of the mind. You’re clear in the present moment. You realize that you have choices in what to think about, what to say, what to do. And you bring more clarity to those choices. And you see the results in your life. You see where you’re going. Where your choices have been harmful to yourself and the people around you. And you realize that you have the choice to change things. Why pile unnecessary suffering on yourself or the people around you? It’s hard enough to live in a world where there’s aging, illness, and death. Why make it harder? At the same time, as you develop mindfulness and alertness like this, you learn to depend on yourself even more. You find yourself that you’re more trustworthy. As you bring a clearer mind to the present moment, you can trust yourself more and more to make the right choice. Use this hour as an opportunity to get to know the body, get to know the mind, through the medium of the breath. Strengthen the body, strengthen the mind, through the medium of the breath. So many people in the world out there live their whole lives without really looking into this possibility that the breath could make a big change in your life. The act of focusing on the breath can help the body, help the mind. And it’s always there. You go home, the breath is with you. You go to school, the breath is with you. You drive along the road, the breath is right there with you. You’ve got this potential. Learn how to make the most of it. There are so many things out in the outside world where people say, “Buy this, buy that, and you’ll be happier. Buy this, buy that, and you’ll feel better.” But this is something you don’t have to buy. It’s right here, all the time, as long as you’re alive. So instead of having to wonder whether those promises that other people make are really true promises, you have a greater certainty inside. If you learn how to depend on yourself, get to know the breath, you’ve got something more reliable here inside. You really can rely on this, this knowledge that you develop as you get familiar with the breath, as you make friends with the breath. So we’ve got this whole hour right here. Make the most of it.

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