Routing Strong Emotions

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Try to be as sensitive as possible to how your breathing feels. When the breath comes in, exactly where do you feel it in the body? It’s not just one spot. Lots of parts of the body are involved in the process. Your diaphragm, your ribcage, your shoulders. Those are the blatant parts of the process. But other parts of your body get involved as well. The more sensitive you are to this fact, the more you see. And the easier it is to stay with the breath. Take whatever parts you are conscious of and make them comfortable. This may involve varying the rate of your breathing, the depth of your breathing, how fast or slow the breathing goes, how refined or how coarse the breathing is. It’s all up to you to decide what you like, what feels good right now, what feels gratifying breathing, and which parts of your body feel starved of breath energy. Try to give them a part of the energy. As you push the borders of this around your body, after a while you begin to realize the whole nervous system can be involved in the breathing. The more it gets involved, the quieter the mind gets, the easier it is to stay here in the present moment. So the stillness and the sensitivity go together. It’s like trying to listen to a piece of music far off. You have to get the mind and your body very still so you can hear the far distant sounds. It’s the same with the breath. There are a lot of subtle breath sensations in the body that you tend to miss if your mind is running around. John Lee gives a comparison of a person born on a train. If you’ve been born on a train and all you’ve seen is that you’ve been on this moving train, as far as you’re concerned, everything in the world moves. People move, cars move, trees move, mountains move, because you’re moving. The only way to know what’s not moving is for you to be still. And the more still you are, the more subtle things you see. And the more your awareness permeates throughout the body, the more you’re reclaiming your body for your conscious awareness. You’re reclaiming the breath for your conscious awareness. The part of the brain that controls your way of breathing when you’re not paying attention to the breath is in one of the most primitive parts of the brain, which is also the part where your emotions register. And if we don’t pay attention to the breath, your strong emotions are the ones that lay claim to it. When greed comes, when lust comes, you breathe in a certain way. It has a certain physiological effect on the body. When anger comes, fear comes, they take control of the breath. And as far as your conscious awareness, it’s confronted not only with the thought of anger and fear, but it’s also confronted with all the physiological consequences. And as a result, you feel that everything’s been hijacked. And it’s this little bit of consciousness fighting off all those primitive urges, primitive desires. And it’s no wonder the conscious mind usually succumbs. Whatever the emotion is, you feel, “I’ve just got to go along with it.” After all, this is what I really feel, I guess. Because, look, even the body is registering these emotions. That’s just one of the political maneuvers of strong emotions. It’s how they take over the brain. It’s like someone coming into Congress with false poll results saying, “See, 80% of the American public approves of this, therefore we better go along with it.” It turns out later the whole thing was a sham. The whole thing was organized. So when you take claim of the breath, then you begin to realize what’s actually going on in the body. And you see more and more clearly when greed, anger, delusion, fear come into the mind, how they set things off. And when you see this more and more clearly, the less you have to fear from them. You see how artificial the process is. It doesn’t have to be that way. One of the greatest tricks is once they set off different hormones into your blood system, the physiological effects stay on for a long time. When you get turned on, your body seems to take over. It says, “See, I’m turned on for a full five minutes, a full ten minutes here. This must be something real.” When you’re angry, the results of the anger, the pounding of your heart, the tightness and tension in the stomach and the chest, they last for quite a while because those hormones are still in your blood system. Even though many times the actual flare of anger, flare of lust that came up in the mind, didn’t last anywhere near that long. These things come and go, come and go. The physical consequences or the physical symptoms of these things are a lot more lasting. As a result, they fool you. “Gee, I must really be angry here. I must really feel turned on.” So it’s important you understand that there is a distinction between the mental state and the physical state. Just because the physical state is registering doesn’t mean that there has to be the mental side as well. Again, the more careful you are to listen to the breath and the whole body, be sensitive to the breath and the whole body, the more you realize it. You don’t have to give in to these things. You can be more in control of the breathing so that you can counteract the hormones. That way you realize there’s less to fear. After all, these thoughts just come and go. They seem to be lasting because they’ve gotten lodged in the breath. But if you occupy the breath and they don’t have that much room to get in, there’s an image of the cannon. They say, “Most people’s minds are like clay. You throw a stone into the clay and the stone can penetrate as far as it wants because the clay is all soft.” In other words, a thought comes into the mind and it can penetrate your whole body because you’re not occupying your body. You’re off someplace else. But if you’ve got the whole body saturated in mindfulness, saturated in this sense of ease and concentration, then the image is trying to throw a ball of string into a hardwood door. The string just bounces off. If you’re occupying the breath, if you’re occupying the body, in other words, your conscious awareness is occupying these things, these other thoughts can’t penetrate because you’re already there. You see them come and you realize immediately there’s a sense of dis-ease, a sense of discomfort that comes along with them. And you don’t have to give in if you don’t want to. So when we talk about developing equanimity, developing patience, it’s not simply a mental exercise. You have to have a physical exercise to go along with it, as dealing with a breath like this, to give those things a foundation. Otherwise, you get knocked over. You have no place to stay in the present moment. These other thoughts come in and you’re gone. You get knocked over by them because you don’t have any foundation. Use your foundation. Take your conscious awareness and use it to saturate the entire body. This is your place. Then you’re in a lot better position. You can deal with greed, anger, and delusions that come in a lot more level-headed way because you feel less threatened by them, less surprised by them, and less overwhelmed by them. You realize they’re just thoughts that come blowing through the mind. And as long as you don’t relinquish your occupation of the body here, they can’t take it over. Even if they do have some influence, you have your part and you stay with your part. In the beginning, you don’t have to figure things out all that much. Just be stubborn. You stay here. They’ll come and they’ll go and they’ll come again and they’ll go again. But as long as you’re right here, they can’t take it over. They can’t blow you around. And the more your conscious awareness permeates the body, the fewer subconscious corners there are in the basement where strange things hide out. You’re more up on what’s going on in the mind. You’re less at the mercy of unknown forces because you occupy all the territory that they could occupy. And you realize it’s not theirs. It doesn’t have to be theirs. It can be yours. You can make a change in how you react to things. Sometimes when a thought comes up, you feel, “Well, I’ve fallen in line with this thought before, and I guess that’s just the kind of person I am.” Watch that thought come and go, too. You don’t have to identify with that one either. If we’re all stuck the way we are, there’d be no point in practicing the Buddha. There would have been no point in the Buddhists teaching the Dhamma. But it’s because we can become more conscious of what’s going on in the mind. We can change our habits. Partly it’s a matter of developing the skill of letting mindfulness, awareness, alertness permeate the body. And partly it’s developing the right attitudes. The right understanding about what’s going on in the mind. Together, these practices put you more in the driver’s seat. The level-headed part of the mind can take control. It’s not blown around by all the hysteria that tends to come along with greed, anger, delusion, and fear. And if that sounds all too rational and dry, it’s not. This sense of sitting here in the body, having the body as your own, this sense of the breath body, from the head down to the feet, can get really gratifying. After all, the teaching here is not just one of being rational. It’s being intelligent in how you look for your happiness, how you look for your own sense of well-being. The word sukha in Pali, which we translate as happiness, also means happiness. It means ease, pleasure, bliss. From simple sense of well-being all the way to intense bliss. That’s what we’re working for. We’re taking happiness seriously. Some people don’t like that idea. They like the idea that happiness is something that you catch on the wing. It can come and go. But trying to use your powers of reasoning and intelligence seems to spoil it. That’s because you use your reasoning and intelligence in awkward ways, clumsy ways. But if you learn to get more and more sensitive, you find that there is a pattern to when the mind has a sense of well-being and when it doesn’t. And you can maximize that sense of well-being. Even though the Buddha seems to talk an awful lot about suffering, it’s for the purpose of understanding suffering so you can go beyond it. The development of mindfulness is not a dry activity. If you don’t do it right, it can be dry. But if you learn how to immerse yourself with a sense of well-being in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, the division between head and heart seems more and more artificial. It’s just a question of awareness. Coupled with the desire for happiness, it’s not going to turn on you. It’s not going to disappoint you. When you’ve got both your head and your heart working together on this, instead of working at cross-purposes, then you find you really do have the strength to make the change, to grow, to develop, more and more skill in how you approach happiness, both the immediate sense of well-being that comes from simply being more skillful in how you breathe and the longer-term happiness that comes as you come to understand the mind more and more and are less hoodwinked by the waves of different emotions that come blowing over, crashing over the mind. It’s one of the most important skills you can develop.

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