Intro to Breath Meditation

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For the rest of the hour, you have no responsibilities aside from staying with the breath. The breath is something that’s going to happen on its own. So even the breath is not that heavy a burden. It’s just keeping the mind with the breath. It’s easy to focus on the breath, but it’s not easy to stay there. So that’s where the effort is to keep the mind with the breath. If you notice that it’s wandered off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. If it wanders off ten times, a hundred times, bring it back ten times, a hundred times. Be true to your determination and learn how to make it not a burden but something you actually enjoy doing. This is why we work with the breath, adjusting the breath so that it’s comfortable. You can start out with a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. If it feels comfortable, stick with it. If not, you can change. Make the breathing shorter, or you can learn how to relax into the longer breath. Find out which parts of the body seem to be fighting the longer breath and allow them to relax. Try in long and out short, in short, out long, in short, out short, deep, shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. All kinds of ways of adjusting the breath. There’s really a lot more here than you might imagine. The breath doesn’t just come in and out. There’s a quality to what’s coming in, a quality to what’s going out, that affects the energy level or the flow of energy through the whole body. So you want to be sensitive for that. To be sensitive requires that you stay here for a while and just watch. Nudge the breath here a little bit, nudge the breath there a little bit, and see what happens. As you get more and more familiar with the breath, you begin to see there’s a lot of potential here in the present moment. There’s a lot to get to know here. And the breath has a lot to offer, because the way you breathe has an enormous impact on the body, and it has a large impact on the mind as well. There are ways of breathing that can cause illness. There are ways of breathing that can cure illness. There are ways of breathing that can aggravate emotions like anger or fear. And there are ways of breathing that can calm them down. So you’ve got this potential right here. Learn to make the most of it. It’s a potential that, for the most part, we tend to overlook. But if you spend time with the breath, watching the breath, adjusting the breath, learning from the breath, you get sensitive not only to the breath, but also to the mind, what the mind is doing in the present moment. And you begin to get sensitive to the ways that the mind causes unnecessary stress and suffering for itself. This is the big irony in our lives. We all want happiness, and yet we cause ourselves a lot of stress and suffering. This is what the Buddhist teachings and the Four Noble Truths are all about. The stress and suffering we cause through our craving, through our ignorance. We love ourselves, we want happiness, and yet we cause ourselves suffering. It’s because we’re not watching, because we’re not attentive. This is one of the reasons why we want to settle down in the present moment, so we can actually see what’s going on, see the subtle ways in which we’re causing unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves and for the people around us, and to see that we don’t have to do it that way. We can see through to another way of acting. This requires both stillness, so you can keep your gaze steady here in the present moment, and then asking the right questions. Where is the stress here? What am I doing that’s causing it? Can I do things in a different way that doesn’t cause that stress and suffering? This way, the meditation involves both tranquility and getting the mind calm, and insight, beginning to see what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing, and realizing that you can change. So focus on getting acquainted here. You’d think that what we do is something that we would see very clearly, but it’s not. We tend to hide it from ourselves. Sometimes our intentions are good, sometimes they’re a little bit less than good, less than honorable. We don’t like to admit that to ourselves, so we’ve gotten used to covering things up. What that means is that it creates a big blank space, a big blind spot in our minds, in our awareness of the present moment. This is one of the reasons why we don’t like to stay in the present moment, because our intentions are happening right here, and yet we’ve gotten used to avoiding them. Even when there’s nothing really especially wrong with the intentions, but we’ve just learned to cover them up. So as we’re bringing the mind back to the breath, don’t be surprised if it does bounce off. But the trick to getting it to stay is, as I said, learning how to make it comfortable, letting that sense of comfort and ease suffuse throughout the body. You can focus on the breath at any one point in the body where it’s easy to stay focused. It can be the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, or any place where you can sense the process of breathing. You can keep your focus comfortable and you can keep that spot of the body comfortable as you breathe in and breathe out. If you notice that the rhythm of breathing is making it tight or tense or unpleasant there, you can change. Once the energy at that spot feels good, then think of that energy suffusing throughout the body. It’s going to be a calm energy, a soothing energy. This is what enables you to settle down and feel more and more at home in the present moment. The more settled you are, the more comfortable you are. You can see what you’re doing. We spend so much of our lives looking at other people. That person did this, this person did that, I like that person, I don’t like this person. Blaming our suffering on this person or that person. Yet the real suffering that goes deep into the heart is our own lack of skill in dealing with the present moment, dealing with our thoughts and our minds, dealing with our opportunities to act and speak and think. So we’ve got to learn to redirect our gaze, bring it in here, and then watch here continually. Now keep asking yourself, “Is there any unnecessary stress or suffering here?” As you get more and more sensitive, you begin to sense things that you didn’t notice before, things that used to be in the background, kind of like the hum of a refrigerator that you didn’t notice until all of a sudden it stops. You begin to realize what had been disturbing you in the background that you hadn’t noticed, but now suddenly you see it and you can learn to stop it. As you’re not burdening your own mind so much, that means you have more strength not only for your own activities but also to help the people around you. Some people think that meditation is a selfish exercise, going out and straightening out your own mind. What about the rest of the world? Well, if you’re not causing yourself unnecessary suffering, if you’re not burdening yourself, you have more strength to help other people. It’s like people carrying a burden around. If they’re already burdened, they can’t help pick up the burdens of other people. If they learn how to put down their own burden, they find they have the strength to help. So not only do you benefit from the practice, the people around you benefit as well. So you’ve got the whole hour to get acquainted here. And when the hour is done, you’ve got the whole rest of the evening. When you wake up in the morning, you’ve got the whole day. Even when you’re doing other things, the breath is always there. You can get to notice. Train yourself to be attentive to how the general breath energy in the body feels. When you’re working and doing other things, it may be too much to ask you to focus on the inness and outness of the breath. But you can focus on the quality. How does the breath energy in the body feel? Where is it tense? Where is it blocked? And even while you’re doing other things, you can relax the tension. You can open up the blockages. It’s an important skill. In this way, you get centered all day. And you get sensitive to what you’re doing all day. That’s what’s important. Because you can take the skills from the meditation and you can apply them at any time, in any situation. At the same time, you also feel at home at any time, in any situation. Even when things outside are difficult, you’ve always got your breath. Keep that as your foundation. And you find you can live with just about anything. And that’s only one of the many benefits that come from the meditation. The more you give yourself to the meditation, the better the results. It’s one of those few things in life that you can’t get too much of. Mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, all these things, the more you have them, the better.

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