Breath Meditation

June 6, 2004

Try to settle comfortably on the breath. Any spot in the body where you can notice that tells you now the breath is coming in, let your awareness settle on that sensation. Don’t push on it too hard, but don’t be too light either. If you’re too light, the mind just floats away. If you push too hard, it makes the breath uncomfortable. There should be a sense of constriction or some sense of feeling fenced in. So just try to be right there with the breath. Be on good terms with the breath. If you can focus on the breath in this way, it’s healing both for the body and the mind. In terms of the body, it helps to balance out the energy flow in the body. When you breathe in, notice the different spots of the body that tense up as you breathe in. Can you breathe in without tensing up those spots? Try to let your conscious awareness go all the way down in the body, all the way down to your feet, all the way down to your hands. This way, in case there’s a lot of pressure on the head, it helps to relieve that pressure and balances things out. It creates a sense of wholeness in the body, which is healthy for the body and also feels good for the mind. It’s a good place to settle down. When the mind has a good place to settle down like this, then it can rest from all of its activities. All too often, the mind spends its time thinking about things that don’t really help it in any way at all. It’s like having a car and just leaving the engine running all day long. Whether you need to use the car or not, there it is. The engine is still running, running, running. Of course, the engine is going to wear out a lot faster that way than if you learn when to turn it off. If we can choose to think only when we really have to think and then can allow the mind to rest when we don’t have to think, the mind feels a lot less burdened. At the same time, its thinking gets a lot clearer. Once the mind is rested and it comes out and approaches a topic, it’s ready to deal with it. It’s like a knife that you sharpened. If you simply use the mind to think, use, use, use the knife without taking care of it, it starts getting dull. When it starts getting dull, it’s hard to cut through things. Sometimes you can chop at something all day long. It just doesn’t get through. But if you sharpen the knife and bring it out only when you need to use it, then as soon as you give it one chop, there it is. You cut right through things. So it’s good both for the body and for the mind to have a resting spot like this to allow the energy and the body to balance out. And if you find areas of the body that are not getting energy, you can give them some of that energy, allow it to flow in there. Sometimes you may notice that it seems like while you’re sitting here, if you can’t locate your shoulder, you have a sense of your arm, you have a sense of your neck, but there’s something seems to be missing between the two of them. Okay, it’s a sign there’s a blockage someplace in there. So see if you can connect things. Exactly where is the connection? It may not be where you anticipate it. And allow that connection to open up. This works with any part of the body, the knees, the legs, the back. When the energy of the body is allowed to flow in this way, the different parts of the body help each other along. Imbalances get to balance out. At the same time, the mind has some grounding. If our mind just floats around, all the time, it doesn’t really know what’s what. It just floats by things and gets a vague idea, and then it floats past something else and gets another vague idea. And that’s what we end up living with, these vague ideas. They’re like clouds. Instead of seeing things precisely, all your knowledge is fuzzy like clouds. And as a result, you don’t know all that much. You can live in the body, you can live with the mind for years and years and years and not really understand them at all, because you’re not sitting still to observe them. The mind isn’t grounded. If you give it a grounding, then it has a good foundation from which to see things. It can watch things as they move. It can begin to see exactly where the boundaries are between things. At what point, say, a simple sensory contact turns into a feeling. And once there’s a feeling, when does it turn into liking? Can you notice that point? We often think that a pleasant feeling comes and it’s automatically likable. An unpleasant feeling comes and it’s automatically disliked. Well, they don’t come together. There’s a series. There’s the feeling, and then there’s the decision whether to like or dislike something. And if you’re really still, you can watch these things. You can begin to see where one thing ends and something else that’s of a different order begins. A different order in the sense that instead of simply being a natural occurrence, it starts embodying defilements, greed, anger, delusion. So you want to sit very still and watch for a while, and you begin to see when it’s just a natural event in the mind and when it’s something you have to deal with. I mean, pains in the body can arise and pass away, and you can deal with them to a certain extent. This is one of the reasons why we play with the breath, experiment with the breath, to see exactly how much the way we breathe affects physical sensations in the body. But there comes a point where you can only do so much with the breath. If the breath could cure every illness and we wouldn’t need doctors, nobody would die. What we do is to use the breath to make the present more livable, to whatever extent we can. And then from there, given the breath as a good foundation, then we can examine other things, things that we can’t. We’ve got to get rid of pains that don’t respond to the change in the breath. But the important thing is that when you have the breath as your foundation, you can look at those pains without feeling threatened. You’re looking from a position of strength, a position of stability, which is much better than getting just thrown into the pain and wallowing around, thrashing around. And then you see that with a pain like that, the problem really isn’t the pain so much as it is the mind’s reaction. But if you can see where the reaction begins and where the pure physicality of the pain ends, that makes it a lot easier to deal with things. You begin to realize that there are physical events and then there are mental events, and they’re different things. The mental events lie more in your power than the physical ones do. Sometimes it may not seem like that. The mind is wandering all over the place. But when you begin to train the mind you find that it does get more and more attractable, easier and easier to deal with things. Decide to focus it in one spot and it’ll stay there. Decide not to identify with a particular emotion as it’s arising and you won’t go running into it. You can watch it. You’re very clear about it. You’re not trying to deny its existence. But you realize that if you identify with it, you’re going to give it power. And if you give it power, it’s going to take over your life. It’s going to cause, wreak all sorts of havoc. So this way you can begin to see there are boundary lines between things that you didn’t see before. Before, everything was a big fog, a whole series of clouds. And where one cloud ended and another began, you couldn’t really tell. It was just all water vapor. But when you sit down and look at things carefully, you begin to see that there are specific events going on in the mind, and they come in a series. And you begin to see where the series is okay and when it turns into something that you’ve got to deal with. And the meditation gives you the tools to deal with it. Working with the breath can create a sense of ease in the present moment, so it’s easier to stay here and watch things. At the same time, you’re developing all sorts of good qualities in the mind. Watchfulness, mindfulness, alertness. You learn that you have to be heedful. When the mind gets comfortable with the breath, you just can’t. You say, “Okay, I’m on automatic pilot now. I don’t have to keep watch over things.” You have to continually watch over things. Don’t let your mindfulness relax. Don’t let your alertness blur out. When you start developing these qualities as you work with the breath, then you find you can take those same qualities and use them for understanding the mind, which is ultimately where the real issues lie. As for the side benefits, as we said, the body gets a lot more comfortable. Diseases that are related to tension can just dissolve away. And even when diseases or pains don’t go away, you’ve got a comfortable place to stay in the body. Those are the side benefits. The real benefits are that you begin to understand the mind and see where the mind is creating problems for you, where it’s creating ignorance for itself. You’ll begin to notice that when we think about other things, you think about the past, you think about the future, you have to blur out the present moment, you have to blur out your sensation of the body to make room for those thoughts of past and present. As a result, you’re constantly engaged in ignorance, denying what’s actually right here and turning into something else. It’s like those function keys on a computer. When you press the control key or the little Macintosh symbol key, suddenly an “S,” even though the keyboard symbol for the “S” is still an “S,” but it does something else. It saves. You press an “F” and it finds things. You press a “C” and it copies things. You press a “Q” and it quits. You’ve changed the function. It’s the same with the body. The breath is here, coming in, going out, but when you want to think about the future, think about the past, you blur out the breath, your awareness of the breath. Then your sensation of the body all of a sudden becomes a background for those thoughts, the present thoughts of the future. This way, you’re dealing in ignorance. This is one of the reasons why it’s difficult to stay with the breath, to keep on this level. Keep remembering, this is the breath sensation. This is the body right here in the present moment. Keep that frame of reference steady. When you’re really good, then you can begin to watch to see how the mind flips over to those different functions of past and future. When you can catch yourself as that happens, you can begin to see how the mind lies to itself. How it loses one frame of reference and picks up another. In the crack between those two frames of reference, you’ll see an awful lot of interesting things going on. Lots of different events. It seems to be instantaneous, but there are lots of little events in there. That’s why it’s so important to get the mind still, keep your awareness continuous, and watch for these discrete things as they’re happening so they’re not just a big fog or a big cloud. There are specific events in the mind. This is how the mind creates trouble for itself. This is how the mind fools itself. When you begin to see through that, then you’re a lot less likely to fall for the tricks of the mind. You’re a lot less likely to create a lot of suffering from your own thinking. So there are a lot of benefits to this practice. It creates a sense of well-being in the body. It creates a sense of wholeness in the body, a sense of wholeness in the mind. As you begin to break down the barriers by which the mind lies to itself, disguises things from itself, when things are open and well like this, then there’s a lot less suffering in life, a lot more energy to do what you know is right in your life, because you’re not creating all this suffering that weighs you down. When you’re not weighed down, then you can help other people with their burdens. You can walk with a lighter step. So this is an important practice. It may seem very basic, but it’s the very basic things that are important, because they shape everything else.

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