Gentle Touch, A

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Give the mind a chance to settle down and try to learn just the right amount of pressure to put on it to keep it there. A lot of people, if you could take a picture of what they’re doing to their minds as they’re practicing concentration, it’s like they’re strangling it. And no wonder the mind rebels. Other people are just barely paying attention. Of course, the mind wanders off. The Canon has an image of a person holding a baby chick in his hand. If you squeeze the chick too much, it’s going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So you have to be sensitive to what’s just the right amount of pressure to place on the breath, to place on the body. Actually, you can’t place pressure on the breath as soon as you do. You’re not really focusing on the breath. You’re focusing on the solid parts of the body or the liquid parts of the body. The breath is something that flows back and forth or stays still. But you can’t catch it. You’re just simply aware of where it is. If you’re putting pressure on the breath, as I said, it’s usually a sign you’re putting pressure on the blood flow in your body. So if you find that happening, lighten up a bit. The breath is coming in, the breath is going on on its own, and all you have to do is to keep tabs on it. Maybe nudge it a little bit here, nudge it a little bit there, but just that much. Don’t put a lot of pressure on it as you’re trying to change it. You’re trying to create a sense of ease here in the present moment, and you can’t create ease with a heavy hand. You need a gentle touch, but a firm touch, sticking with it. That’s the trick. As Ajahn Fung used to say, “It’s a small thing that we’re doing here, but you have to do it continually.” The phrase worked better in Thai because it was a pun. The word for “small” is “nit,” and the word for “continually” is “nit.” It’s spelled in different ways but pronounced the same way. So it’s a slight effort, a slight amount of pressure, but it’s a pressure you can maintain over long periods of time, just reminding yourself, “Here’s the body.” There’s energy flowing around it, energy flowing on its surface, energy flowing through it, and you keep tabs of that fact. What we’re doing here is a willed process. Concentration is a willed process. It’s intended. Many times our problem is that when we will something, we tend to push too hard. We want results right away. We want the lights. We want the actions right away. And it doesn’t work like that. It’s something you have to sidle up to, something you have to approach gently, one step at a time. Just this breath. What can you do to be at ease with this breath? What can you do to be at ease with the next breath? Sometimes it means adjusting the breath. Sometimes it means just simply allowing the breath to be the way it is, without any interference. You’re free to do it either way. That’s one of the nice things about the breath as a topic of meditation. There’s so much freedom there. You could even be in jail. You’d still be free to breathe whatever way you wanted to. And yet for so many of us, we mistreat the breath, forcing it this way, forcing it that way, subconsciously. One of the reasons that John Lee has you work with the breath is to undo a lot of subconscious misdirection of the breath, to bring it back to a state of normalcy. So try to learn this sensitive touch, this gentle touch that’s just enough to keep you with the breath, but not so heavy that you’re beginning to imprison it. And then the next step is to train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you do this. And you can work up to the whole body, section by section, or just think whole body, and there you are. Again, this is something that varies from person to person. To be aware of the fact that as you’re breathing in, the whole body is involved. There’s an energy flow. Some parts of the body, the energy is still, and other parts, the energy is flowing. Even still breath counts as breath energy. It’s like a TV screen. Sometimes you see pictures flashing across the screen, and other times you get just the white noise look of the screen. Either way, the electrodes are still registering. But in some cases there are shapes, in other cases there’s no shape at all. Some parts of the body, the breath energy has a shape, it has a flow. In other parts, it seems diffuse and still. But either way, it counts as breath. And all you have to do is be aware of the whole body, this whole body energy field, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And once you can maintain this awareness, and here the emphasis is beginning to switch from the breath a little bit more to the awareness, both together. Then you can allow the breath to settle, to quiet down. The in and out breathing gets calmer and calmer. And again, you do this by allowing it to happen, not forcing it, not squeezing it. And one of the best ways to allow it to happen is just simply allow your attention to be still. So you can work at this either from the way you deal with the breath or the way you manage your awareness. Direct your awareness. Develop a certain quality of awareness. Because we’re dealing right at the point where the mind and the body meet. And so you can approach it from either side, either from the quality of the awareness or from the quality of the breath. Most likely, you find yourself switching back between the two modes. And this gives you a good safe harbor, a place where outside of your mind-narratives don’t have to come in, where the mind has something else to do besides tell itself stories. If you’re going to have a running commentary, have a running commentary on just what’s happening right now. John Lee talks about the activities of the mind either wandering out or hovering around the present moment. They’re basically the same activities. There’s the mental chatter and the feelings and perceptions. And it can either be directed outside, directed to the past, directed to the future, or the same processes are just acting right here, hovering around here. And it’s in hovering around here that they bring your awareness to where it really ought to be. Because if you want to understand how you shape your life, it’s being shaped right here. So pay attention to the feelings and the perceptions and the thoughts that hover around the present moment. Meditation is not a process of stopping thought right away. It’s just bringing your thought to bear on what’s happening right here, right now. Some people, this is threatening. They’re not afraid of what’s going on right here, right now, which is why we take the channel approach, this sort of indirect approach of working with the breath, keeping it channel, which allows things to come up in the mind in an unthreatened way. At the same time, the solidity of your concentration or the continuity of your concentration gives you a way to allow these things to come up without your getting involved. You have a more objective way of looking at them, simply as events. “Oh, this event happens in the mind. That event happens in the mind.” There’s a certain amount of detachment, even though you’re right there. And again, the gentle touch is important here. As we were saying this afternoon, there are these hardened shells around the heart, almost literally, many people literally around the heart area of the body, or sometimes around the neck and the shoulders, where you’re holding in all kinds of emotions, all kinds of issues. And if you try to come barging in and straightening them out, the shells harden up. It’s only if you start treating them gently that they begin to loosen up a little bit, soften up a little bit, and things come out. They come out in a setting where you can deal with them. You’re not threatened by them. They’re not threatened by you. That’s how a lot of these issues can be resolved. Because what we come to see as we meditate, ultimately, is the mind’s own abuse of itself, its own mistreatment of itself, causing itself to suffer in ways that it doesn’t have to. And a lot of these lessons are things we don’t want to hear, which is why we have to put the mind in the relaxed, calm, steady state with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, and a sense of fullness that comes from the stillness. Because it’s in that context that the issues can come up and you can not feel threatened by them. Then you have the strength to deal with them. It’s like a person who’s well-fed. When someone’s well-fed and well-rested, you can talk to them about all kinds of things. You can bring up the least little bit of criticism about them, and they snap right back. But if they’re basically in a good mood, you get them at the right time, you can discuss almost anything. And issues that ordinarily would seem impossible can easily get resolved. So it is with this insight in the mind that you’re going to see how the mind causes self-suffering. You’re going to see how the mind is stupid, how it’s ignorant. All of which are things we don’t really like to see. But the cure of the mind requires that we see these things and deal with them, sort them out. So as we develop a state of concentration, it’s for the purpose of sorting these things out. This is how the Buddha determined what was right concentration and what was wrong concentration. Right concentration is the kind of concentration in which you can do these things. Wrong concentration either blots things out so you can’t see anything, or it lacks the sense of ease and well-being that give you the foundation you need for dealing with difficult issues. So when the Buddha talks about right concentration, the rightness is for the purpose of gaining insight into the mind. That’s for the purpose of resolving a lot of the issues that we’ve been carrying around. That requires a state of mind that’s all around, with as few hidden spots as possible, and with a sensitive touch. If you’re going to deal with your mind, you need to have a very gentle, sensitive touch. That’s why we work with the breath, because the breath is next to the mind, the most sensitive thing there is. If you’re barging your way into the breath, either confining it or forcing it this way or that, you’re not going to have the gentle touch you need to work with the mind. So first you practice with the breath, and then you turn around and apply your greater sensitivity to just being with awareness, noticing how things stir in awareness, what they do, how things get formed. So try to work on this gentle touch, the touch that finds a balance between desire and awareness, that allows concentration and insight to come together. After all, the concentration is willed, but we need a certain amount of openness in this willed state so that we can see what’s going on. We need enough desire to keep us here, and yet not so much desire that it’s getting in the way. All this requires sensitivity. Someone’s pointed out that sometimes the texts say that breath meditation is for everybody, but he said it’s only for everybody if they learn to be sensitive. So to develop your sensitivity, keep it focused on each breath, one at a time. Don’t worry about where it’s going or how you want to force it this way or force it that way. Just figure out some way that you can relate comfortably to each breath as it happens. That pulls you more and more into the process. present moment which is right where you want to be.

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