Relating to the Breath

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Okay, settle into the present moment. Get your body in position, right leg on top of the left leg, your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Sit straight, face forward, and close your eyes. That’s getting the body in position. The mind in position is focusing on the breath. You can focus on any part in the body where you feel a sensation that tells you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. You’ll find there are lots of possible places in the body. You can focus on the rising and fall of the abdomen, the feeling of the breath coming in and out the nose, the rise and fall of the chest, the diaphragm, the diaphragm. Choose whichever spot feels most comfortable to stay focused. That’s getting the mind into position. The getting into position isn’t all that hard, either for the body or for the mind. It’s staying in position that takes some work. The body’s used to moving around, and the mind is even more used to moving around. In a split second, it can go around the world. It’s used to not having anybody panning it in like this, and it’s going to resist. It’s going to fall into its old habits very easily. So be alert to that fact. When you notice the mind slipping off the breath, bring it right back. If it slips off again, bring it back again. Don’t get involved in a lot of recriminations. Discouragement is normal for the mind to move around a lot. So when it happens, just take note of the fact and bring it back. We’re here to train the mind. So it’s going to take some effort. The trick is to minimize the amount of suffering, the amount of stress, that goes into the practice. There are various ways of doing it. One is to concentrate on making the breath really comfortable. That sensation you focus on that lets you know the breath is coming in, lets you know it’s going out. Try not to squeeze that part of the body. Allow it to feel wide open. The breath can come in from any part of the body that wants to, because the breath is actually not just the movement of the air in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole energy flowing throughout the nervous system that accompanies that in and out movement of the air that causes it to happen. Think of it flowing freely throughout the body, from the top of the head all the way down to the toes. You can try adjusting the rhythm of the breath. Sometimes long breathing feels better than short breathing, or long in and short out, or short in and long out. Sometimes deeper breathing feels best. Sometimes more shallow breathing, fast or slow, heavy or light. There’s lots to experiment with. In fact, experimenting with the breath is one good way of getting you interested in it. You begin to see that different rhythms of breathing have different effects on the body. Above all, try to be on good terms with the breath. Some people, when they have trouble staying with the breath, start regarding it as an enemy, which isn’t good at all, because, after all, the breath is what’s keeping you alive. And it goes with you everywhere you go. So what you want to do is develop a good relationship to it. Because when it gives the mind a good place to settle down, if you’re on good terms with the breath, it’s easier to settle down. And secondly, when you create that good relationship with the breath, you carry it around with you everywhere you go. This way you begin to embody a lot of good qualities, like the chant we just had now, and what we call the sublime embodings. If your relationship with the breath embodies those sublime embodings, then you’ve got them with you wherever you go. That way you can tap into them. The teachings on goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy or appreciation, and equanimity are not just words. They’re actually the way you relate to your breath. And then the way you relate to the breath is going to affect the way you relate to the people around you, the way you relate also to your own mind. So this is important. Goodwill for the breath means that you would like to see it feel good. After all, it’s the energy that’s keeping the body going, and it only stands to reason that if the breath is comfortable, if the breath is in good shape, then the body is going to be helped. It’s going to be good energy for the body. This is called having goodwill for the breath. Compassion for the breath. When the breath is uncomfortable, look into it to see what’s wrong. See what you can do to make it more comfortable. Appreciation for the breath is when the breath really does feel good. You do what you can to keep it going and make it even better. You don’t start taking it for granted. And finally, equanimity. There comes a point where sometimes the breath can be made only so good. There’s nothing much more you can do for it, so just accept that fact and leave it be. For example, there are different pains in different parts of the body that come up as part of staying in position. Especially if you’re new to the meditation, you can be pretty sure that by the end of the hour you won’t have much feeling in your legs or there’ll be pain in your legs or your back or your hips or anything. It’s to be expected. At this point, you’ll learn how to develop equanimity to that pain. You can rest assured that you’re not doing permanent damage to the body or even damage that’s going to last more than a few minutes after you get out of meditation. It’s simply happening that the blood that used to circulate freely through different arteries and veins is suddenly blocked off and is being pushed into capillaries. It’s the capillaries taking this load, which causes the pain. It’s like those days after the earthquake in Los Angeles when Interstate 10 was demolished. All of a sudden, all the traffic around the freeways was pushed onto the streets and the traffic was a mess. But the capillaries in the body are different from streets. Streets can expand. Your capillaries can. And over time, if you sit regularly, the capillaries begin to open up and you get new channels. Basically, you reroute your arteries and veins so your body becomes adapted to the meditation posture. So you’re not doing damage to the body. It’s just a process of growth. So what you have to do is develop equanimity towards the pain. Decide that you’ll stay with the comfortable breathing that you’re able to maintain as you go through the pain in the knee and out and out. If the pain is in the hips, again, think of the breath energy going down the back and out the legs. Relax whatever tension you feel around the pain. See how much the breath can do for the pain. You’ll come to a point where sometimes the pain will actually go away. Other times it won’t go away, but at least you’re relaxed around it so you’re not adding more pain on top of the original pain. At that point, you’re trying to develop equanimity for what pain remains. After all, you’ve got lots of different other places in the body where you can stay where it’s comfortable. You don’t have to obsess about the pain. This way you develop the right attitude to the sensations in the body. You embody these teachings on what are called the Subliminal Paths. Subliminal body is goodwill, compassion, appreciation, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. You carry them around with you. When you relate to your own body, your own breath in this way, it becomes a lot easier to relate to other people in the same way as well. If you’re breathing in a way that feels strained and stressed, it’s hard to feel nice, warm, fuzzy thoughts about other people. It’s hard to genuinely wish for their goodwill when you’re causing yourself pain and suffering. So first learn how to relate to your own sense of the body in a way that embodies a healthy attitude, where you’re causing as little stress and suffering as possible. When you carry this sense of well-being around with you, it’s a lot easier to wish for the well-being of others, to act for the well-being of others, to speak in ways that foster their well-being. In this way, the teachings you get when you look in the books—how the Buddha teaches about this, how the Buddha teaches about the Four Noble Truths, how he teaches about the factors of awakening, how he teaches about these Subliminal Bodies, whatever—they’re not just words. They’re actually qualities, the relationships that you develop right here and now. Because you develop them toward the breath, that means that wherever you go, you’ve got that relationship inside. You can tap into it whenever you need it. It underlies all your other actions as well. In this way, the practice of meditation isn’t something you simply do in your spare time. It’s totally unrelated to the rest of your life, or it’s just a momentary escape from the stresses and strains of your life. It actually becomes a source of strength that you then carry with you out into your daily activities. The word meditation in Pali is bhavana, which literally means to develop. You’re developing qualities in the mind. It’s not just a matter of sitting with your eyes closed and being concentrated for an hour or so. You’re trying to develop these qualities so that they’re there all the time, so you can tap into them whenever you need them. You want to develop the right relationship to your breath. You want to develop these qualities so that you carry them around with you and they become basic to everything you do, everything you say, everything you think. That’s when the training of the mind shows its real benefits. So even when the body’s not necessarily in position, the mind is in position. It’s in a right relationship to itself, to the thoughts that come into the mind. It’s in a right relationship to the breath. From there, it spreads out to a right relationship with everybody around you. You begin to see the power of a trained mind. The Buddha said, “The mind, when trained, brings happiness.” It’s not a happiness with borders. It’s not just inside you. It spreads out all around you as well. (dog whining)

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