Introduction to the Breath

February 19, 2005

There are two last chants we had. They are there to remind us of why we need to meditate. We’re looking for happiness. We’re looking for a sense of well-being. But we live in a world where there’s aging, illness, and death. The Thai translation of that statement we chanted, “Subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death,” can also mean that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal. That’s the way human life is. Separation is a common part of life. That’s what we’re up against. The fifth reflection of those five. This is the one that, by its own, is the only one that’s not depressing and not discouraging. In fact, it’s the opposite. Our happiness, or lack of happiness, depends on our own actions. And actions here mean not only what we do with the body, but also our speech and, most especially, the mind. In other words, the mind can make a difference in spite of the situation outside. By training the mind, it’s possible to gain a happiness that isn’t shaken when there’s aging, illness, and death, when there’s separation. And it’s this way that we can find that happiness that we want, through our own actions, through training our intentions. In such a way that we strengthen the mind. So that happiness doesn’t need to depend on things that age, grow ill, and die, or that we can be separated from. So that’s why we’re here. Specifically, the training has to start with mindfulness and alertness. In other words, on the one hand, keeping our situation in mind. Realize that we can’t be careless in our lives because our actions do make a difference. They have effects that sometimes we may not like the effects of what we do. So we have to be careful about what we do. But the fact that we need to be careful means there are precious things in the mind. Keep those in mind as well. Your desire for true happiness and the good qualities you have—goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity when it’s needed. But also things like mindfulness and alertness, because you need to be alert to what you’re doing. If you want to understand where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering. So that’s what we’re working on as we meditate. Mindfulness and alertness. Try to be mindful of the breath. Keep the breath in mind. When it’s coming in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. Keep that task in mind. Remind yourself that’s what you’re here for. You’re here to develop these good qualities, and the breath gives you a good place to practice them, because the breath is always with you. And then the alertness is what actually watches what the breath is doing. It also watches what the mind is doing. In other words, if you notice that you’re slipping off the breath, bring the mind right back. That’s a third quality that’s needed. It’s a quality of ardency or intentness in what we’re doing. Just give it your full attention, because your happiness depends on it. It’s your ability to train the mind to develop these qualities. Because it’s not only your own happiness that comes from this. It’s also the happiness of people around you. So many times we know the right thing to do, the thing that would help the people around us, and yet we don’t have the energy. What the meditation does is give you the energy. It gives you the strength. So if the right thing to do becomes an easy thing to do, the people around you benefit as well. Meditation is not a selfish endeavor. It’s one of those few activities that is good both for yourself and for the people around you. So keep that in mind as you meditate, too. Now, if you notice the mind slipping off, when you bring it back to the breath, try to make the breath more comfortable. Because many times the reason we slip away is because the breath doesn’t feel right. It feels tight or constricted or forced. So be very careful to notice. When is the breath getting too long? Are you squeezing it out too much? Are you pulling it in too hard? Or, on the other direction, is it so weak that you can’t focus on it? Learn to adjust your breathing. Adapt your breathing to what feels just right right now. This can take a little while to get a sense of “just right.” But who can know better than you what’s going to be just right for the body? Learn to use your own sensitivity. Learn to read the sensations in the body. You begin to notice that the sensation of breathing is telling you things. It’s too long or too short or too deep or too shallow. Or that it’s just right. This is something you can experiment with. If you have trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word. Butto is a traditional one. It means “awake.” That was the title of the Buddha. That was why he was titled the Buddha, when he was awake. He’d woken up from his delusions, from his ignorance. That’s the quality of mind we’re trying to develop here, to be awake to what we’re doing. When the breath starts getting comfortable, you can think of spreading that comfortable sensation throughout the body. Think of a body where it’s easy to keep track of the sensation that tells you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” Both the in and the out feel comfortable right there. And then just think of that sensation of comfort spreading through the body, seeping through the body, to give you energy where you’re tired, to relax you where you’re tense. Then you may find some parts of the body that don’t seem open to that sensation. So go around them. Go through them. Focus on the areas where you can create a sensation of ease, well-being. So simply sitting here, breathing in, breathing out, feels good. And you’re not tensing up the body in any place to create breath sensations or to force the breath too much. If you want, you can go through the body section by section. You might start at the abdomen, then work up to the chest, the neck, head, down the back, out the legs. And starting at the back of the neck, going down the shoulders, out the arms. And you’ve covered the whole body, just noticing what each section of the body feels like as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where there’s tension or tightness, allow it to relax. So you’re not creating tension as you breathe in. You’re holding on to tension as you breathe out. This way you create a sense of ease that permeates and suffuses the whole body. And then you learn how to allow it to stay. So you’re not pushing it or pulling it too much. You’re not squeezing it out. And with that general sense of well-being, an ease that’s allowed to stay there, it grows into a strength. And this is what we’re working on. The strength the mind needs, because it’s got to put up with a lot of issues in life. Both things coming in from outside, and also issues that come bubbling up in the mind itself. You need the strength to figure out what’s the right thing to do in response to whatever’s happening around you or in you. So this is what basic meditation is about. It gives you the strength you need to deal with the fact that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, separation from others is an inevitable part of life. But we do have this ace in the hole. We have our ability to act. We have our ability to train our actions so that when we don’t care about what’s going on around us, we don’t keep causing suffering for ourselves. We all want happiness. Yet one of the big paradoxes in life is that we interfere with our own ability to maintain a sense of well-being. We actively create suffering for ourselves, stress for ourselves, when we don’t need to. It’s because we don’t see it happening. So the meditation is what gives us the power to see. Once we see what we’re doing is unskillful, we can learn to undo those actions, retrain ourselves. It gives us that power, too, that strength, too. This is the foundation. Work on the foundation consistently, because if the foundation is weak, then the other things you want to build on top of it are going to come toppling down. So make sure the foundation is strong. It’s a simple exercise. The difficulty lies in sticking with it. But that difficulty gets weakened by the fact that if you understand what you’re doing and why you’re doing it, you see the value of the practice, that it really does make the mind a much stronger thing, a much lighter thing. Then understanding what you’re doing and seeing the results gives you strength in and of itself. So work on this foundation until you begin to see how it is affecting the mind. And then you can judge for yourself what a useful skill this is. (crickets chirping)

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