Your Secret Foundation

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Let’s say that the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, started out by meditating on his breath. And you look in the canon and you see that his most detailed meditation instructions are focused on the breath. The breath as a basis for establishing mindfulness, gaining concentration, discernment, and release. Why is this all focused on the breath? For a lot of reasons. When you’re with the breath, you can see a lot of things in the body and the mind. It’s like standing on a mountain pass. If you look to the north, you can see through the pass to the north, you look at the south, you can see through the pass to the south. The breath is where the body and the mind meet. And when you focus the mind on the breath, you’ve got all the processes of fabrication right here. That’s what’s called the bodily fabrication. It’s the breath in and of itself. There’s verbal fabrication. It’s where the mind directs its thought to the breath and evaluates the breath. And then there’s mental fabrication. It’s the feelings that arise, the sense of pleasure, the sense of dis-ease, depending on whether the breath is comfortable or not, and your perceptions, the labels you put on things. These are all present right here. Everything you really need to know gathers around the breath. It’s like going into a savanna in Africa. If you want to see the animals in the savanna, all you have to do is camp out at the watering hole and everybody comes there. The breath is a good place for developing all kinds of good mental qualities. For mindfulness, you can carry it throughout the day. The breath here meeting not only the in-and-out breathing, but also just the sense of energy flow in the body. It’s always there for you to focus on. It’s not like other meditation objects where you have to visualize things or you have to use a word. The breath is there, whether you’re intending to meditate or not. It’s going to be right there. So it gives you a good solid foundation, a good frame of reference. If you want to bring the mind to concentration, the breath can be very soothing. And if it’s not soothing to begin with, you can make it that way. It’s a good bodily process to work with. If you’re feeling tense, you can breathe in a way that’s relaxing. If you’re feeling tired, you can breathe in a way that’s energizing. It’s a good way of bringing things to balance. And it’s a good place for developing insight. The whole point of insight is to see how the process of fabrication leads to stress. One good way of looking at it is, how is your bodily fabrication leading to stress? What ways do you breathe that are uncomfortable and don’t have to be? Many times the breath goes on automatic pilot and you suddenly find yourself breathing in a constricted or tight or very uncomfortable way. You don’t have to. Nobody’s making you breathe that way. Even if they threw you in jail, they couldn’t change the way you breathe or force you to change the way you breathe. Yet it’s our own lack of attention, our own lack of understanding of the process, that we find ourselves caught up in uncomfortable ways of breathing. So now we can develop our understanding by looking into the flow of energy in the body. When you breathe in, does the energy flow up to the head? Does it flow down to the feet? It can do it either way. And what happens if the mind and the body are connected? There’s a lot of upflow or a lot of downflow. Do you feel the breath energy only in your skin or does it go deeper, say deep into your brain? Think of your brain as having an infinite capacity for taking in breath energy and see what that does to the process of breathing. Are there parts of the body where the breath energy always seems still? If there are, those are good places to settle down. And how do they connect up with the other spots? If you can connect them up, you’ve got a good basis for a good whole-body awareness, which is the basis for right concentration. And what element does your will play in all of this? John Fung once noted that all the way up into stream entry, there’s always going to be an element of will in the way you breathe. And when is that for the good and when is it not? These are all things you can explore. Or when you’re ill, what can the breath do for your illness? If you’re in pain, what can more skillful breathing do to relieve the pain? Because the breath is many times very helpful in taking apart your perception of pain. Say there’s a pain in your knee and you have this notion that there’s a big block in your knee of pain. Well, if you think of the breath energy going through it, there are the sensations in your knee that are actually body sensations, the solid sensations, and there are the breath sensations. The pain sensations. See them as three different kinds of sensations. Take that block apart. You find that the mind will tend to glom them all together. They don’t have to be that way. If you can open and air out your perception of pain, that has a very different effect on the mind. You can focus right in on the knee, focus on the breath sensations in the knee, and just put aside the pain sensations. Be very selective in what you focus on. You find that you can live with the pain and yet not be pained by it. That’s an important skill. And you begin to see how the process of perception really does shape the way what you originally thought was just the raw sensation of pain. But actually you begin to see that it’s a fabrication as well. This is probably one of the most important insights to see what you think of the given in your experience. Your experience of the world, your experience of your own body, your experience of your own mind. Seeing how much of that is actually a product of will. Not only of past actions of your will, but also your present intentions. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that even your experience of feeling takes a potential for feeling and fabricates it into an actual feeling. And the same for the other aggregates. Your potential for perception, your potential for fabrication, your potential for consciousness. These are all things that come in from past actions and then are shaped by present intentions. And you can begin to see this in the breath. The breath is as close as you can get to focusing on the mind without actually focusing on the mind itself. It’s kind of right next door. And because it’s the part of the body that’s most sensitive to the movement of the mind, it’s a really good mirror for the mind. So it serves a lot of functions. When you get tired of investigating or your investigation starts getting kind of blurry, you can just stay with the breath and be still with the breath. Think of the breath as kind of a comfortable glow throughout the body. And then just stay with that sensation, stay with that perception, until you feel refreshed enough. And then you can start moving out and questioning the way you breathe, questioning the way the breath moves through the body, the way the mind reacts to the breath. And in going back and forth like this, you’ve got the basis both for tranquility and for insight. So this process, which is part of your body, and your body is normally part of the world, can be turned into something else, can be turned into your path. So you go beyond the world. This world that we chatted about just now, the world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. It’s insatiable, a slave to craving. You take all that and you turn it into your path, you turn it into Dhamma. And the spot where the transformation takes place is right here at your breath. And if you didn’t do it with this breath, we’ve always got the chance with the next breath, and then the next, and then the next. The breath is very forgiving that way. And you start seeing the breath as a process of fabrication, and you start seeing the other things going on in your mind as a process of fabrication. Start applying the same insight into the world outside. It helps give you some distance. And that sense of distance is a valuable thing. It’s not like you’re far away from something. It’s more like you’re living with the potentials for all kinds of things that you could make into suffering, but you don’t. The things that used to have a huge impact on the mind, you realize that the impact comes not from their reaching into your mind, but from your reaching out and trying to grab hold of them. You try to turn them into something, but you don’t have to. That’s where the sense of distance comes from. In John Lee’s images of a match and a box, you could use the match to strike against the side of the box and create a fire, but you don’t. You could focus on things in such a way that you turn them into a world and then you go along with all the suffering that goes in the wake of that act, but you don’t. It’s an important skill, and it’s a skill you learn as you focus with the breath. So pay a lot of attention to this process of breathing, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed and nothing else to do, but when you’re doing it, you have other things to do as well. Many times it’s useful to catch yourself in the act. When the mind is sitting here meditating, sometimes it’s acting up, other times everything seems very peaceful and quiet, like all the kids in the classroom. They’re all working hard at their studies. You have no idea that they could create any trouble at all. When the teacher goes out of the room, all of a sudden they start throwing spitballs and airplanes and beating up each other. So it’s useful, as you go through the day, to be like the teacher standing just outside the door. The kids don’t know the teacher’s there, so the teacher can figure out who are the troublemakers in the room. Try to keep the breath as your foundation as you go throughout the day. You’ll see a lot of movements of the mind as you go through the day. You’ll see things you never saw before. Some of the most liberating insights are the ones that come at unexpected places like that, as long as you’re in the right place to see them, which is where you are when you’re staying with a sense of the breath energy in the body. So keep this as your own secret foundation. Nobody else has to know. As John Lee once said, “The things that nobody else knows, those are the ones that are safest.”

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