Balanced Breathing

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One of the constant messages we get from the world is that what you’re doing right now is not all that important. Important things are being done by other people, some other place, some other time. And they want you to help them keep their economy going, watch their shows. As if what you had to do with your time was not that important. This is where the message of the world and the message of the Dhamma are very different. The message of the Dhamma is that what you’re doing right now is very important. It’s the most important thing you can pay attention to right now. It’s what you’re responsible for. It’s what’s going to have an effect on your life and on the lives of the people around you. What you did yesterday is done. There’s nothing much you can do about it. You can learn from it. In fact, that’s one of the most important lessons about the past. It teaches you, “When you do this, these are the results. When you do that, those are the results.” So it’s not like the Buddha is asking you to forget about the past. He’s just asking you to look at the past in the right light, what you can get the most out of from the past. If you sit around missing things from the past, that’s not relating to the past in the right way. As for the future, if the future is going to be good, it has to come from the presence being good. Focus your attention right here. Try to be very careful about how you focus your attention. Focus it on the breath coming in, going out, and don’t let the breath get mechanical. Try to be sensitive to the way you breathe. There’s a lot of information about your subconscious mind in the way you breathe. We’re talking this afternoon about clamping down. Some people have the idea that when you breathe in and breathe out, you’ve got to make it really obvious that this is the in-breath and that’s the out-breath. What we tend to do is breathe in a little bit too long to establish, “Okay, this is the in-breath,” and we breathe out a little bit too long to establish that that’s the out-breath. It’s kind of a strain at the end of the breath to mark it very clearly. That’s kind of a cartoon idea of the breath. What you want, as much as possible, is a seamless, sense of energy. Maintain a certain sense of energy. The breath comes in, the breath goes out, and it doesn’t disturb a sense of comfortable energy in the body. You don’t have to define very clearly where the one begins and the other ends. They’re all part of the same element. If you notice the mind slipping off, be meticulous about it. It’s the little things that are important. The Buddha has a teaching on little things that you’re not supposed to be careless about. You can’t be careless about little snakes like baby rattlers. They don’t know how much poison to put into their bites, and so they put all their poison into each bite. That’s why a bite from a baby rattler can sometimes be worse than a bite from an adult rattler. He says you can’t be careless around little princes. Little princes grow up to be big princes that carry grudges. You can’t be careless around a little fire. Little sparks can grow into huge conflagrations. He also said you can’t be careless around young monks, because sometimes young monks have more power in their meditation than you might expect. There’s another thing you can’t be careless about, and that’s the little defilements in the mind, because they can grow into big ones. You can’t be careless about little lapses of mindfulness, because they can grow into huge lapses. So try to be meticulous as you look after the breath. Take very seriously this sense of comfort that you can maintain. Find a level of energy in the body and see how you can breathe in a way that doesn’t destroy that comfortable level of energy. Notice even the slightest fluctuations, the slightest disturbances. It may seem obsessive, but it’s an important habit to have in your meditation. Remember Ajahn Fung’s telling me about Ajahn Mun. How obsessively clean and neat he was. And it was with a purpose. Your outside habits have an effect on your inside habits. This is one of the reasons why the forest tradition takes the monks’ rules so seriously, even the minor ones. In Ajahn Mun’s statement to Ajahn Fung one time, he said, “People rarely get whole logs in their eyes, but they can get sawdust in their eyes and it can blind them.” In other words, even the minor rules, especially the minor rules, are important to look after, because it develops that habit of being meticulous. We have a tendency to say, “Well, let’s get to the major principle and let’s not worry about the little tiny details.” And, of course, the devil is in the details. Because when things come up in the mind, big problems start out as little tiny things. A little tiny bit of greed, a little tiny bit of irritation. If you’re not careful, it can take root and grow. A little bit of sloppiness in the way you’re focusing, a little bit of sloppiness in the relationship with your object—that can take root and grow as well. So find a way to be meticulous, not tense in being meticulous. You want to be meticulous in being relaxed, having a sense of ease. The greater sense of ease you can bring to this, the longer you’ll be able to do it. The easier you’ll find it to maintain a sense of balance, a sense of well-being. But you have to be very observant. That’s one of the tricks of the meditation. Many times when we think about concentration, we think about tensing up around the object. And that kind of concentration can get the mind focused, but it’s hard to keep it going. It doesn’t last. When you can stay focused, you’re focused with a sense of ease, that can last for a long time. It can become your basic default mode. So be careful. That’s one of the ways you can translate the Buddha’s last words. He says, “Become consummate through being heedful.” “Consummate” here means being consummate in your virtue, consummate in your views, and bringing all the factors of the path to a state of consummation, of completion. And you do it by being careful, realizing that you can’t be sloppy. You can’t be careless. Some of the things you’re bringing to consummation, though, are tranquility, serenity, equanimity, and contentment. These are not tense qualities. This is one of the basic skills you need to learn in the meditation, how to work persistently, just keep at it, keep at it, but not get tense about it. When you can find that proper balance, you find the path becomes a place where you can stay. You don’t keep straying off into the woods. You have a sense of feeling at home as you work at the path. So do your best to make this sense of being right here with a person in the breath, here in the present moment, having a sense of its importance, having a sense of the importance of being more mindful and being more alert, but also a sense of how important it is to feel at home here. That’s the balance you want to strike. you

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