What Focus, What Breath

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Focus on the breath. That’s how meditation instructions begin. A single sentence takes just a few seconds to say it, but it can take months and years to figure out what it means to focus and what the breath is. In the course of figuring those things out, though, you’ll learn an awful lot of important lessons, both about the body and about the mind. In terms of the breath, you have to look at what are your preconceived notions of what’s happening as you breathe. When we say to breathe in with the whole body, many times you find there’s a subconscious idea that your body is like a big lung, a big sac that the breath comes in and then it goes out. So there’s a membrane surrounding the breath that you bring in. There’s a boundary to it. But what is breath that it would have a boundary? It’s basically energy flow. It’s the flow. In Thai, the word for breath is the same as the word for wind. Where is the boundary to the wind? A closer label or mental picture of the breathing process would be of the body being bathed with the breath, or permeating it from all directions. If you saw the movie Goldfinger, you remember why the woman died. She was painted gold. And even though she could still breathe through her mouth and her nose, the breath energy through the pores, the oxygen exchange of the pores, was cut off and that killed her. So there is some breathing that goes on through the pores, an important part of the breathing process. When you think of letting the breath come in, put the emphasis on the letting. It’s like letting the wind come through your house. You don’t pull the wind in or push it out the other direction. You simply open the windows. You open the doors, and the wind will come in and go out on its own. So try to keep that mental picture in mind. Otherwise, we force the breath in all kinds of unnatural ways, and it can be bad for the body. That’s the other problem with our ideas about what it means to focus. When we focus on something, we usually tense up around it. You focus on the head, you find yourself giving yourself headaches. You can focus on the abdomen and give yourself abdominal problems. The problem comes from the way you focus, the tensing up. This is why Ajahn Lee says that when you get a sense of comfort in the body, think of it spreading, spreading, spreading in all directions. Again, you don’t want to build up a wall around the sensation. You want to let it permeate any kind of sense of wall or barrier so that your focus, your awareness, has that same quality of the breath. It permeates the whole body, surrounds the whole body, rather than squeezing it. Placing a boundary around it. These are just a couple of examples of how our conception of the breath and our conception of focusing, or the way we focus, can cause problems. Now you have to use a process of de-perception. Try to ferret out exactly what your perception, what your mental picture of the process is. Or catch yourself in the process of, say, tensing up around something as you focus on it. Learn how to question that perception, question that mental picture, and replace it with a better one, one that allows you to focus on the breath without distorting the breath and without causing any physical problems. At the same time, give yourself a really comfortable place to stay. This is an important principle in the practice. You’re not going to overcome sensual pleasure unless you have a better pleasure and concentration. You’re not going to overcome sensual attachment, sensual desire, unless you have a better place to stay inside. Otherwise, you’ll be denying yourself up to a certain point. Then the issue of frustrated desire will come in and take over. It will drive you out. But if you can actually give yourself a good, viscerally pleasant place to stay, then you have more of the voices in the mind on your side. John Lee makes this point over and over again. You’ve got to get your defilements on your side as you practice. Give yourself a good place to stay. Your attachment will tend to focus here. Your desire will tend to focus here. That way, they become a force for the path. Remember, right effort includes desire—the desire to get rid of any unskillful states that are there and to prevent unskillful states that haven’t come yet from arising. The desire to give rise to skillful states and then to maintain them and bring them to fruition. Without that desire, the practice doesn’t go anywhere. Or, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order for the meditation to go well. You really have to like it, to enjoy it, to be fascinated by it. So give yourself a pleasant place to stay and give yourself some interesting questions to ask about staying here with the breath. Learn both about the object you’re focusing on and about the activity of focusing. This is what sampajjana or alertness means—having a sense of what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. When you learn about the simple act of focusing, you can begin to see the impact it has on the breath and on the body. That sensitizes you to a lot of the other activities that are going on in the mind. The intentions you have, the results of those intentions. This, for the Buddha, is the big issue, because it’s through the way we intend that we cause stress and suffering. But if we’re not sensitive to what we’re doing, we don’t see the connection. The stress seems to be out there in the things arising and passing away. And partly it is there. The simple fact of arising and passing away means that events of experience have some stress built into them. But the stress that’s really important, the suffering that’s really important, is the one that comes from craving, and that’s an activity. In fact, there’s one sutta where the Buddha actually talks about craving as a path of practice, an unskillful path of practice. But it’s a path of practice that most of us live by. And until you can begin to see the impact of even simple intentions in the mind, you’re not going to realize what path of practice you’ve been following and the results that come directly from that path of practice. So simply focusing on the issue of how to focus on the path of practice and what it means to focus, what breath is, which sensations you’re having that are breath sensations, which ones are liquid sensations, which ones are earth sensations or fire sensations. You learn a lot about mental and physical events, nama-rupa, they call it. It’s all right here. And it’s not just a matter of being abstract. It’s immediately present in the act of focusing on the breath. It’s simply a question of being more and more sensitive to what’s right here. That’s when you learn about these things and see the role that intention has in taking the potential for a physical or mental experience and turning it into the actual experience. Again, all these things are right here, but we’re blind to them. It’s like coming across a sign that has a finger pointing off to the right. We immediately look off to the right. We don’t look at the sign. Thoughts come up in the mind and they point us in another direction, rather than looking at the actual process. We look in whichever direction the thoughts point. So we miss a lot of things that are going on right before our eyes. The choices we make, the way we focus right here in the present moment on this breath, that contains all the lessons we need to learn if you can develop the imagination to ask the right questions and the ability to see in an all-around way. Because a lot of the insights that you’re going to gain in the practice are the things that you see out of the corner of your mental eye. you

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