Friendship

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Focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breath in the body. You may feel the passage of air into the nose, or you may feel the movement of the body itself as it breathes in, as it breathes out. That’s the more useful place to focus. It means you can focus anywhere in the body. Notice how the breathing feels. Try to explore what feels best. Sometimes long breathing feels good, sometimes short, sometimes heavy, sometimes light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. You’ve got a whole hour to explore here. Try to notice how the breath affects your experience of the body. Sometimes you breathe a certain way and after a while the body begins to feel very heavy. Or you can breathe another way and the body’s going to feel light. You can breathe in ways that rob you of energy and other ways that can make you feel stronger. In other words, simply by noticing how the breath feels, paying attention to it, you begin to realize you’ve got a lot of potential here. Sometimes if you have a headache, you can breathe in a certain way that makes the headache go away. Or if you have a stomachache or if you feel tension around your shoulders, you can breathe in a certain way that’ll make the tension go away, i.e., free medicine. You don’t have to go buy it from anyone. You don’t have to see the doctor. Just use the breath and you can deal with a lot of discomfort in the body. You can make the body feel light, full, refreshed, if you take an interest in the breath. If you don’t take an interest, if you see it simply as a chore, you’ve got to sit here for an hour watching your breath and there’s nothing else to do. What usually happens is the mind starts creating other worlds for itself. You start remembering the past, planning for the future, doing all kinds of other things except learning about the present moment. As a result, the hour gets wasted. It’s rare you get an hour like this where you can just be with the breath and learn about it, explore it, experiment with it. So do what you can to take an interest in it. When you learn about the breath, it’s like having a friend inside. The breath can do all kinds of things for you when you need it, if you’ve trained yourself to learn about it. And being on good terms with your breath this way helps you feel comfortable in your own skin. It gives you a sense of being grounded. Not the sense of being grounded in the sense that you can’t go anywhere, but grounded in the sense that you feel solid inside. You’re not easily blown around by other people’s opinions, other people’s words. You feel solid within yourself, secure within yourself. This puts you in a position of strength. Because once you’re on good terms with the breath this way, you’ve got a good friend inside. Once you’ve got this good friend inside, you can be more particular about your friends outside, who are the people you want to associate with. This is really important. There’s a passage in the old Buddhist texts where Ananda, one of the Buddha’s major disciples, comes to him and says, “This is half of our holy life. Half of the life we lead as monks is having good friends, having admirable friends.” The Buddha said, “No, don’t say that. It’s the whole of the holy life. It’s the entirety of the holy life.” Because without the Buddha as a good friend, the monks would never have learned about the path to awakening. If you look at your own life, you see how much your life is shaped by the friends you choose. Given that friends are important, you’d think that we’d put more attention into choosing our friends, deciding which people are really worthwhile. That’s the chant said just now. Some people come on, they control, they flatter us, they say nice things to us, and all of a sudden we decide that they’re our friends. Then they can cheat us, take advantage of us. Or, as the chant says, they may be good only in word. They make all kinds of promises, but when push comes to shove, they disappear. The question is, why would you want to choose friends like that? The reason is because you don’t have a friend inside. You feel lonely, you feel insecure, and you want to have lots of friends. Because of this sense of emptiness or vacuum inside, you’re not very choosy. You’re not very particular. You’re not wise in choosing your friends. But if you had a greater sense of feeling comfortable in your own skin, feeling secure inside, then you could be a lot more particular. After all, you’ve got the breath as your friend. You can depend on the breath. When you get a sense of feeling secure in solitude, if you’re not afraid of being alone, then you don’t have to worry about how many friends you have. Then you can choose friends who are actually good for you. People who point you to worthwhile things. People who really share in your sorrows and joys. People who are helpful and sympathetic. Because when you come right back, you’re not afraid to be a part of it. Isn’t that what you want out of friendship? Not quantity. You want quality. When you see that the nature of friendship is that you pick up habits from your friends, you want to be very particular about who you associate with. So it starts within. Learn how to be friends with your breath. Learn how to associate on good terms with your breath. If you’re sympathetic with your breath, then you’ll have a helper. In other words, listen to the body. Look at what feels right. Don’t ignore the needs of the breath. Sometimes the body simply needs to sit and breathe comfortably for a while to gain its strength. How many times have you stopped to really notice that? What kind of breathing feels good for the body at a particular time? When you’re tired, what kind of breathing is good? When you’re angry, what way of breathing helps to diffuse the anger, that sense of frustration, that sense of pressure inside that makes us do and say things that we later regret? When you’re afraid, what’s a good way to breathe? When you’re bored, what’s a good way to breathe? You can play with the breath. You can do all kinds of things. Think of the breath coming in the back of the neck, coming in and out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. There are all kinds of ways you can play with the sensation of energy flow in the body. It’s not just entertainment. You learn from it. As with any skill, it often begins by just playing around, and then you begin to see that it really does have an important impact. It’s like learning to play the guitar. You get your guitar and the first time you pick it up and play with it, it doesn’t sound all that good, but it’s fun to try. Try this, try that, and after a while you can actually play songs. If you stick with it, you become a good guitar player. It’s the same with the breath. Try different ways of breathing. Think of it as a game to begin with. What’s long-breathing like? Try that for five minutes. How about short-breathing, deep-breathing, shallow-breathing? At first it may just seem like a trick or an idea. It’s like a title game, but it’s not. You begin to realize how much the way you breathe has an impact on the body, has an impact on the mind. And you begin to see the value of exploring this part of your experience. It’s something you carry with you all the time, and yet we very rarely take advantage of it because we don’t know it. We haven’t paid attention to it. We haven’t been a good friend with the breath. So learn to be a good friend with the breath, and the breath will become your friend as well. And then, as Ajaan Lee says, you won’t be lonely. Everywhere you go, you have friends going with you. All the parts of the body become your friends because you’re on more intimate terms with them. You understand them better. You’re better at creating a sense of ease and well-being in the body. When you’ve got this stable center, then the issue is not that your friends outside become less desperate. When you’re not desperate for friends, then you find you get better ones, more reliable ones, because you’ve become more reliable as well. So it’s important that you take some time to develop this skill. Do what you can to become interested in the breath. And you’ll find that it pays you back many times over.

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