Befriending the Breath

August 3, 2006

The air is cool and still. Try to make your mind cool and still as well. Bring it to the breath and tell yourself you’re going to become friends with the breath. If you’re meditating and you have trouble staying with your meditation object, it starts becoming your enemy, your opponent. You start trying to squeeze it and force it down to get it under your control. That just makes things worse. It gets more and more difficult to stay. You want to be on good terms with the breath after all. It is the force that keeps body and mind together. And if you’re not on good terms with your breath, you’re in a lot of trouble. Approach the breath as you would any potential friend, realizing that it’s going to take time and you have to be very observant to develop a real friendship. You can focus on the breath anywhere in the body that seems comfortable. It might be the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, down in your abdomen, any part of the body that lets you know clearly, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” You can sense it, and it feels comfortable to focus your attention there. And then allow the breath to be comfortable. After all, it is a flow of energy. You can’t bottle it up. It makes things tight and constricted in the body. You’re just keeping tabs of the energy. Think of it as watching a river. The river flows past. Even if you put your foot in the river to try to stop it, the river goes around. It keeps flowing past, flowing past. So your only duty is just to watch it flow past, to keep track of it. And you can adjust the flow a little bit here and there so that it feels good, it feels refreshing to breathe in, it feels relaxing to breathe out. You want to develop this sense of friendship inside, so that wherever you go you have this inner friend. Even though there may be discordant things happening in the world, at least you’ve got harmony inside. That’s what matters. You’re acting from harmony. Your actions are harmonious. Your words are harmonious. Your thoughts are harmonious. You protect yourself this way, and you become a force for harmony in the world as well. This is an important principle. All the important qualities we need to develop in our relationships with other people, we first have to develop within ourselves, in our relationship with others. In our relationship to the breath, we start out with thoughts of goodwill, like the chant we had just now—goodwill, compassion, appreciation, equanimity. Have goodwill for your breath. You want it to be comfortable. Compassion is where you see that the breath is not comfortable, and you learn various ways of helping it along to make it more comfortable, so you feel more at ease breathing in, breathing out. It doesn’t feel restricted, it doesn’t feel tight. Once it does start feeling comfortable, then you appreciate it, realizing that this sense of ease inside the body, if you pay enough attention to it, will grow. And it’s something that’s really important. One of the chants we have regularly contains the line “having respect for concentration.” It means just this, having a sense of the importance of keeping your mind centered, keeping things good inside, so that you’re on good terms with the breath, on good terms with your body. In the beginning, it may not seem like much, just a very ordinary sense of well-being. Well, allow it to stay. Don’t let anything in the cycle of the breath, the in-breath or the out-breath, destroy that. You may begin to notice that it certainly does. At certain points in the breathing cycle, you tighten things up to, say, mark the end of one breath or the beginning of another breath. You don’t have to tighten up at all. You don’t have to punctuate things. Allow the flow to be easy all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and all the way through the spots in between, so that you’re floating on a comfortable breath energy. When you can maintain that sense of well-being, the well-being inside begins to grow. It’s allowed to become continuous. It develops momentum. And then finally, equanimity. If you find there are certain parts of the breath energy that you can’t help in this way, just chalk that up to past karma and focus on the areas where you can help. This is an important principle about equanimity. The Buddha is not saying to be indifferent to everything. He says there are certain things that you simply have to accept the way they are. You leave them alone, because you can’t change them. That gives you the energy to focus on the things you can change. That’s when the breath starts feeling comfortable in the spot that you’re focused on. Think of that sense of comfort seeping out through different parts of the body. John Lee gives ideas about how it may go, but those are just general principles. You may find that your body has a different pattern of energy flow. So explore that sense of ease. Think of it spreading out. You might think of it as melted butter just spreading through the body, soaking through the whole body, filling it with a sense of ease as you breathe in, ease as you breathe out, in a dissolving way. Any sense of tension or tightness you may feel in different parts of the body. Once you get the sense of ease filling the body, it’s a lot easier to stay with the breath because you start becoming more and more friendly with the breath. And when you get on good terms with your breath, it’s a lot easier to be gone on good terms with other people. If you’re carrying around a sense of inner irritation or a sense of inner disharmony, it’s hard to be kind, generous, harmonious with other people. You’ve got to start from within. If you have a good relationship with your breath, then it’s a lot easier to be on good terms with the people around you and to be really helpful to them because you’re not burdening yourself down with unnecessary suffering. That way you have more energy to help the people around you deal with whatever their issues are. So it comes down to having the right relationship. Between body and mind. We read the text, we read the instructions, and they’re meant to give you a general idea of what you might learn as you try to get more and more familiar with the breath. But you’ll find that, as in any friendship, there may be unexpected things. So be observant. Keep your eyes open. Do your best to be alert and mindful. And over time you’ll find that you develop a really good friend, a friend that will see you through all kinds of difficulties.

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