The Buddha’s Secret Weapon

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Try to be comfortable with the breath. Find the right amount of pressure for your focus. In other words, not so weak that you start drifting off, and not so heavy that you start interfering with the breathing. Try to get a sense of what breathing feels best. This may involve playing with the length of the breath, the heaviness of the breath, or your sense of how the breath comes in and out of the body. All of this comes under evaluation and the factors of jhana. Feel a nice breathing sensation. It feels good all the way in, all the way out. You’re not squeezing anything at any part of the breathing process. Then think of that sense of open relaxation spreading out to fill the whole body. So the body seems to be one large, connected sensation. There may be little islands here and there that resist that sensation for a while, but don’t pay them any mind. Focus on the parts that do feel connected, that do feel comfortable. This is the singleness of preoccupation factor of jhana. So when you’re focused on the breath, that’s the directed thought. You’ve got the three causal factors of jhana right there. And the results are going to come. A sense of ease and well-being are pleasure. A sense of refreshment, sometimes to the point of rapture, just feels really, really gratifying. Breathing in, breathing out, it seems to satisfy the body’s hunger for a comfortable sensation. This ability to tap into a sense of ease and well-being. It’s the food of rapture, they call it. It’s probably the Buddha’s secret weapon in the path to the end of suffering. Because, as he points out, most people think there’s only one alternative to physical pain and mental pain, and that’s sensual pleasure. That’s why people go running after sensual pleasure. They’re trying to get pleasure from other people, pleasure from things, because otherwise they feel they’re just going to be stuck in pain. And you go back and forth between the two extremes that the Buddha talked about in his very first sermons, sensual indulgence and then sensual pleasure. And then there’s self-torture, because there comes a point where people indulge in an awful lot and they feel very guilty about the whole thing. And then they go to the opposite extreme, which is to punish themselves. And as the Buddha pointed out, neither side is going to get you to the end of suffering. What he does is he provides you with this other way of getting a sense of well-being, just having the mind still with a comfortable sensation, flooding the body, the awareness filling the body, so the mind doesn’t feel constricted. It feels wide open and at ease. And that satisfies a lot of the mind’s desire for pleasure. In fact, it’s a pleasure that’s much more encompassing, much more immediate, and even sensual pleasure. And it’s much more lasting. And it’s this pleasure that enables you to stay on the path. Without it, the path is just a lot of shoulds. You should do this, you should do that. And if the mind doesn’t get any sense of gratification, if it doesn’t get its desire for some immediate visceral pleasure, it’s going to rebel. An important principle in the path is learning how to get a very deep and gratifying sense of well-being, pleasure, rapture, as you focus on the breath. So if the breath doesn’t seem particularly rapturous or pleasurable, play with it for a while. If that doesn’t help, just let it go and say, “Okay, if the body is going to breathe, it’s going to breathe on its own. I’m not going to interfere.” See what an uninterfered body is like, an uninterfered breath. There may come up a sense of drowning while you try to let the body do its own thing. But that’s actually the other side of rapture, the body that’s uninterfered with. That’s where the seeds or the potential for a rapture lie. So when you’re adjusting the breath, you’re learning to adjust it away from unhealthy or uncomfortable patterns. But when you finally get to a sense of well-being in the breath, that’s when you let it take over on its own. So that the shoulds of the path don’t become onerous. Once, when I was in Bari, they were giving a course on the Metta Sutta, the one we chant often. I taught my course the week before, and I was staying on to do a little study and a little meditation on my own. They asked me to sit in on the course on the Metta Sutta. The very first line, “This is what should be done by someone who aims at a state of peace.” Somebody raised his hand and said, “Wait a minute, I thought there were no shoulds in Buddhism.” They spent the whole morning arguing about that. What the Buddha is saying is, “If you want the state of peace, this is what you should do.” He’s basically talking in terms of cause and effect. The right view is the should of the path. Look at things in this way, and then you see that there’s a duty. Now, the should here doesn’t come from some sort of outside being. It’s not a decree laid down by a god. It’s the Buddha’s own observation in terms of cause and effect. If you want to use cause and effect in order to put an end to suffering, this is how you should look at things. Each of the factors of right view has a should tacked on or implicit. When there’s suffering, you should comprehend it. When there’s a cause of suffering, you should let it go. When elements of the path arise in the mind, you should develop them. And when there’s an end of suffering, you should try to realize it. Those are the shoulds, and they’re very congenial shoulds. After all, who doesn’t want an end to suffering? The difficult part lies in being consistent and taking that as your goal. You should stick with it and learn how to look at things in line with these four truths and their duties. It means going through all of your preconceived notions, all of your attitudes, and sorting them out in terms of this one overriding concern. The should is for someone who wants happiness. There are so many other shoulds in the world that have no relationship to whether you’re going to be happy following the shoulds or not. This is one of the problems in Western civilization. There are lots of shoulds coming at all of us, and very few of them are really concerned with whether we’re going to be happy. This is why there’s such a strong sense in our souls that we’re going to be happy in society, that if you want happiness, it’s going to be a battle. You either help the happiness of others or the happiness of yourself, but never the twain should meet, except in very rare circumstances. So people go back and forth between self-indulgence and then taking on bodhisattva vows where they want to save all the rest of the world without any thought for themselves. Those are two other extremes. The Buddha’s solution is that there is a way to find your own true happiness and not harm anybody else, actually contribute to their happiness. The image he gives is of two acrobats. Each acrobat looks after his or her own sense of balance, and that way they help each other. So in this way, the Buddha gives you some shoulds that are concerned with your own happiness. And he also gives you this secret weapon, this alternative to sensual pleasure and pain, the pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind, the pleasure that comes from learning how to focus on comfortable sensations in the body and letting them spread. So in the course of following the shoulds of right view, you also have a sense of happiness and well-being in doing it. So both sides of the mind, the side that looks at the larger issues of life and wants to deal with these large problems of suffering, and the other side that wants happiness right now, wants pleasure right now, you can satisfy them both through this practice. So, as the Buddha said, don’t be afraid of the pleasure that comes from concentration. There’s that story of how, after all those years of self-torture, he realized he’d come to a dead end, and he stopped to reflect. He remembered that was a time when he was a child. He could remember when he had gained a calm state of oneness and well-being, just sitting under a tree. And he asked himself, “Is this the path? Maybe this is the path to end of suffering.” And he said, “This could be it.” And the question was, “Why am I afraid of that sense of well-being, the pleasure, the rapture that comes from that? Is there any blame attached to it?” And he said, “There’s none.” “This must be the path,” he said. Notice that his first intimation of the ethical path was right concentration. And then, turning that right concentration into the path to end of suffering, he gathered the other seven factors as well. And what he calls the requisites, or the aids, to right concentration, is the heart. It’s the other factors that make sure the heart stays alive. So adjust your views so that they’re in harmony with this, and adjust your practice so that you have a sense of well-being that’s immediate, visceral, on call for whenever you need it. That’s when the path can come together.

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