At Home with the Breath

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One of the traditional terms for concentration practice is vihara-dhamma. It’s a home for the mind, a dwelling for the mind. The verbs for the different states of jhana—what you do, you enter, and you dwell—you make yourself at home. So here’s the breath coming in and going out. That’s going to be your home for the next hour. As I say, it takes a heap of living to make a house a home. In other words, you want to find some way of breathing that’s good to settle into, something that feels comfortable. Of course, this has to build on a solid foundation. This is why the precepts are an important part of the practice. It’s not that you simply stick meditation to any old way of living at all. There are certain ways of living that are conducive to allowing the mind to settle down, to settle down comfortably. Because if in your day-to-day actions you do things that are harmful, then as soon as the mind gets quiet a little bit, you start thinking about the harmful things you did. It’s like reopening an old wound. Either that, or you start denying that you did anything wrong, and that’s like developing some hard scar tissue over that. In either way, it’s not a good place to settle down. At the same time, when you observe the precepts, you’re developing good qualities of mind that you need in the meditation. You have to be mindful of your precepts. In other words, keep them in mind. You’ve made this promise to yourself. You’re not going to still or steal. You’re not going to lie. You’re not going to kill. You have to remember that. Then you have to be alert to watch what you’re actually doing. If you begin to see that your actions are going against the precept that you promised yourself you were going to uphold, you have to stop. The act of observing the precepts is a kind of meditation. It develops qualities of the mind, like mindfulness. Then you bring them to focus on the topic of your meditation, like the breath coming in and going out. You add another quality, ardency, which means you really try to do this skillfully. In other words, as soon as you notice that you’ve slipped off, you bring yourself right back. You learn the skill of coming back without a lot of self-recrimination, without a lot of discouragement. You have to be businesslike about it. The mind has slipped off? Okay, bring it back. Slipped off again? Bring it back again. Because the nature of the mind, or the habits of the mind, have been wandering around for a long time, who knows how long, and to suddenly make it stay at home, it’s going to resist. So you have to keep bringing it back. But when you bring it back, make sure you bring it back in a way that’s solid and comfortable at the same time. Because if bringing it back becomes a chore or becomes something unpleasant, it’s going to get harder and harder to bring it back. So each time you come back to the breath, ask yourself, “Is the breath as comfortable as it could be? What would be a better way of breathing right now?” John Lee gives lots of recommendations in Method Two. Those are to get you started. He developed that method right after he’d had a heart attack and he needed to pull himself together. He was out in the forest. He’d walked three days over mountains to get to the place where he was going to spend the rains retreat. Soon after he got there, he had a heart attack. He knew the only way he was going to get out of there was to walk back. He didn’t have any medicine. He was far away from any kind of help. So he had to rely on himself to pull himself back together again physically. So he started working with the breath, the breath energy in the body. And the way he worked with it eventually got written down into that Method Two, starting with the breath energy in the back of the neck going down the spine. I’ve known some people with heart problems that say that’s precisely what you need. The buildup in the neck and the shoulders. But not all of us have heart problems. We have other problems. Weak backs. Digestive problems. Tension in different parts of the body. I’ll try to figure out what way of breathing or conceiving the breath is good for that particular problem. If you have problems with a weak back, you might want to try visualizing an energy that comes up solidly from the soles of your feet, up through your legs, and up your spine. It keeps coming up both with the in-breath and with the out-breath. See what that does. Or if you have headaches, focus your attention down in your chest and think of the excess energy in the head coming down through your throat and into the chest. There are lots of ways of playing around with the breath energy. It’s very malleable. Many times the limiting factors are, one, our imagination, and two, the steadiness of our concentration, our ability to keep a particular concept of the breath in mind, i.e., mindfulness and alertness. But the important thing is that you keep trying, as long as the breath is not yet comfortable. Try to find ways of changing the rhythm, changing the texture, changing your conception or your perception of the breath, the way you label it, the way you have a mental picture of what’s going on in the breathing process. You can change all of these things to see what you find easiest to settle into. Now, as the breath gets comfortable, try to spread that sense of comfort so that it radiates out and fills the body. This way you find it easier and easier to settle in and to enjoy the meditation. Because if there’s no enjoyment in the meditation, it’s going to be hard to stay. The mind will keep resisting. It’ll want to go out someplace else and find something more interesting to think about, to look at, to imagine. So, to fight that tendency, you can give it a really nice place to stay. Again, it’s like staying in your house. If you have lots of entertainment in the house, lots of good books to read, a good entertainment system, you’ll feel less and less inclined to go out and demonstrate in the streets, get into trouble on a street corner, get run over by a car, because you’re staying at home. There’s lots to keep you occupied at home. Of course, this is not just for a pleasant abiding in the here and now, although that’s an important part of the meditation. The mind has a sense of well-being in the present moment. You tend to be a lot kinder to yourself, a lot kinder to the people around you. It’s a lot easier to develop the attitudes we know we should develop towards others. I.e., goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity when that’s called for, when you’re coming from a sense of well-being. Because you’re working in concentration, don’t be in too great a hurry to move on to the next stage. Learn to occupy this place. Dwell in it. Settle in. The texts say, “Enjoy it. Indulge in it.” It gives you a greater sense of well-being right here, right now, and you feel less and less inclined to go out looking for scraps outside. At the same time, as you get used to having this greater sense of well-being inside, it makes you more sensitive to what the mind is doing. This is how concentration leads to insight. After all, what is insight all about? It’s seeing the unnecessary stress that you add to experience. You’re not going to see that until you get very sensitive to how easeful things can be. It’s like living in a big city. If there’s a steady background hum, you never know what real quiet is. You want to go out someplace where it’s so quiet that you can actually hear the blood going through your ears. That’s when you know what quiet is. The same way with the mind. If you want to know how much stress you’re adding to things, you try to make things as comfortable and easeful as possible inside. So when the mind moves in a particular way, out of greed, anger, or delusion, and creates a sense of stress inside, you’ll see it. Because it’s no longer there in the background hum. So this ability to create a sense of ease in the present moment, to make this house of the body into a home, is important not just for the sense of ease and well-being it creates right now, but it changes the center of gravity in your life. If you’re the sort of person who’s creating a lot of tension inside yourself all the time, it’s easy to go out and create trouble for yourself. For other people as well. But if you’ve got this sense of well-being that you can tap into, you’re much less inclined to want to cause anybody else to suffer. You get more sensitive to the subtle ways in which you do that, which you do cause an unnecessary burden for the people around you. It’s like the old principle of the oxygen mask. You’ve got to put your mask on first, not because you want everybody else in the plane to suffocate, but you’ve got to put your mask on first to make sure that you’re in the right position to put other people’s masks on. You’ve got the strength and the clarity to know what the causes of happiness can be. You can be a good example to others. At the same time, you get more and more sensitive to the very subtle ways in which the movements of the mind—ignorance, fabrication, all those things you read about in Dependent Core Rising—you actually begin to see them because you’re more quiet, in the same way that you can hear subtle sounds when you’re more quiet. So it’s a form of ease and well-being, and as the Buddha said, it’s blameless. You’re not harming anyone else, and at the same time, it’s a kind of pleasure that carries clarity with it. So many times, the pleasure that we search for in life is under a fog when we try to find our happiness in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. You could say it’s under a fog or in terms of the fire sermon which we chanted just now. There’s a lot of smoke. It obscures your vision. If your happiness depends on somebody else’s suffering, you’re not going to see their suffering. You’re going to pretend that it doesn’t matter, or that it doesn’t exist, or that they don’t matter, or that what you’re doing really isn’t causing them any harm. In other words, you blind yourself so that you can continue enjoying that particular kind of pleasure. So if you really want to see things for what they are, you’ve got to develop a pleasure that comes from within, that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else, and doesn’t require you to blind yourself. That’s precisely what the concentration offers. So do your best to use your mindfulness and alertness and your ingenuity to figure out a way to make the breath a home. A home built on a solid foundation, with a good view, a place where you can really settle in and stay.

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