Lessons From the Breath

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Close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in. Know when it’s going out. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with a breath, like bhutto, which means “awake.” Think bhutto with the in-breath, toho with the out. Bhutto, bhutto. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Try not to force it too much. You’re not trying to nail the mind down. You’re not trying to nail the breath down. You just want to keep track of how it’s coming in, how it’s going out. If you put too much pressure on it, it’s going to rebel, like a child that you beat too much, that you’re too harsh with. You have to give the breath some room. This is an important principle, learning how to get along with your breath. It’s very similar to learning how to get along with other people. If you get along well with your breath, it teaches you lessons on how to get along with others as well. That’s what you’re doing when you train the mind. It’s not just lessons for why you’re sitting with your eyes closed. It’s lessons for when your eyes are open as well, when you’re walking around. It’s lessons for dealing with other people. In order for the breath to be comfortable, you have to listen to it. In other words, try to be sensitive to how it feels. Be sensitive to the way you focus on it and how that affects the breath. You’ve got to learn how to get along. If you don’t get along, the mind is not going to settle down and you’re not going to get much concentration. There will be very little peace of mind. Then you can take that lesson and apply it outside as well. To get along with other people, you’ve got to listen to them. Be sensitive to how your words, how your actions affect them. See what they need. And if you’re coming from a position of strength, it’s a lot easier to deal with them. This is an even more direct connection between your breathing and your dealings with other people. Because if the breath feels good, the rest of the body can start feeling good as well. You can hook up to the breath energy in all the different parts of the body. When you’re coming from a position of comfort, you’re coming from a position of strength. And in dealing with the breath, you’re learning all the lessons you need for developing the brahma viharas. In other words, you approach the breath with goodwill. You want it to be comfortable. You want it to be easeful. Anywhere where it’s not, you pay attention to what it needs. Does it need to be shorter, longer, faster, slower? Deeper, more shallow? And you make those changes where you can. When it’s already going well, you try to maintain that sense of ease. You don’t take it for granted. You don’t just throw it away. You appreciate it. Recognize its importance. And then there are areas of the breath that you can’t make go as you’d like. Well, you have to develop equanimity. So you’ve got lessons in all four of the brahma viharas. Goodwill, compassion, appreciation or empathetic joy, and then equanimity. When you learn how to deal with your breath in this way, it’s a lot easier to deal with other people in this way as well. So this practice we’re doing here is not just a practice for running away and having nice mind states on our own. We also learn how to take those mind states and apply them to our dealings with other people. This is what you take back with you when you go. You develop a sensitivity, you develop a wish for happiness. You don’t get cynical or jaded about that. You’re developing both the heart and the mind. In Buddhism, they don’t make clear distinctions between heart and mind. In other words, the emotional side and the intellectual side, they go together. They’re just two aspects of the same thing. So, for instance, while you’re learning about dependent-core arising, it may seem to have very little to do with heart issues like goodwill, but it really has quite a lot. Goodwill involves mental fabrication and it involves verbal fabrication. It’s something you consciously do. You try to do it with as much knowledge as possible so that your mental and verbal fabrications don’t cause suffering. You understand that when you think, when you have feelings and perceptions, if you do it with ignorance, it’s going to cause suffering. But if you do it with knowledge, it goes in the other direction. It helps form a basis for your own intentions as well, when you’re going to act, when you’re going to say things, when you’re going to do things, when you’re going to think things. It’s based on your perceptions. It’s based on your feelings, the things you focus on as being important. This is all in the Buddha’s analysis of why we suffer and how we can put an end to suffering. So use that understanding to keep reminding yourself that thoughts of goodwill, the wish for happiness, are not a bad thing. It’s actually a good thing. It’s our motive for being on this path to begin with. We want to find true happiness. We want happiness that doesn’t cause any suffering to other people. For happiness that causes suffering to others is not going to be true. It’s going to be destroyed easily. So we realize that we want to base our actions on attitudes that are going to be as conducive to happiness as possible. This is where the Brahmaviharas come in. So you tell the mind part of your body-mind-heart complex that this practice is an essential part. At the same time, you teach your heart. It’s got to respect the principles of causality. In other words, you wish happiness for others, but you realize there are certain things that you simply can’t do for them or they can’t do for themselves. That’s where you have to develop equanimity. If you wish happiness for others, sometimes you realize it’s going to take time. The causes have to be right, and it’s also going to have to depend on their attitudes as well. If you see someone doing things that are going to cause suffering, you can’t simply say, “Well, may they continue doing those things and yet be happy,” or “May they just stay the way they are and be happy.” That doesn’t work. You’ve got to recognize that if they’re going to be happy, they’re going to have to change their ways, change their attitudes, their thoughts, their deeds, whatever it is that they’re doing wrong. It’s a good will. It’s not just learning to try to be happy just as you are or wishing for other people to be happy just as they are. You’ve got to realize that sometimes changes have to be made. That’s why we have a path. And sometimes the changes are just not going to get made. That’s why you have to have equanimity. But when you see the opportunity for the changes to be made, you go for it. This is a part of having genuine good will for yourself. You’re not just accepting yourself as you are. You’re accepting the fact that you can change and that your actions have consequences. You can’t just wish for the consequences to be whatever you want them to be if you’re not going to create the causes to be in line with what you want things to be. You’ve got to make adjustments in your behavior, in your attitudes. If you’re dealing with other people and they just simply won’t change, that’s what equanimity is for. John Foon used to say that good will without equanimity, good will without the equanimity that comes from jhana or concentration practice, can be a cause for suffering. You want other people to be happy, but they’re just not going to change their ways, or they can’t change their ways. So you learn equanimity. It’s the same way as when you’re dealing with your breath. Sometimes you’d like to be comfortable, but there are feelings in different parts of the body that just simply will not go away, no matter how you breathe. Uncomfortable feelings, feelings you don’t like, but they’re not going to change. So you learn how to accept them and you work around it. When you find yourself running into an obstacle, you don’t just give up. You figure, “Well, there must be some other way around this obstacle, one way or another. Maybe I can get that person to change that. Maybe just by creating a good attitude I can create a different environment for that person. Maybe someday they’ll soften up, or someday they’ll be receptive.” So what this means is you train your head side to respect the desire for happiness, to realize that this is important. You train your heart side to respect the desire for causality, that simply wishing for happiness is not going to make it happen. There are things you’ve got to do, some things you’ve got to change, skills you’ve got to develop. When your head and your heart are on the same page like this, both of them can grow. They help each other along. So it’s here at the breath that your head and your heart can come together. When they come together here, they can come together in other areas of your life as well. For it’s right here that you learn a lot of important lessons in putting the two of them together. So you’ve got a whole hour to learn these lessons. Bring your full intelligence to this. Bring your full heart to this. And that’s how eventually you’re going to get full results.

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