The Meditation Game

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Try to approach the meditation as a game, something you do because you enjoy it. There are different ways of enjoying the meditation. One is just simply that sense of ease that you can develop, and another is to take an interest in what is this. What is this breathing process that’s going on in the body? It keeps you alive. Can it do more than that? What does it feel like? Where do you feel it? What kind of breathing feels best? In other words, take this as an opportunity to learn. You’re not just tying the mind down to an object. You want to explore the object. The best way to get to know something is, one, to pay careful attention to it, keep on watching it continually, and two, fool around with it. Try different ways of breathing to see what results you get. If you simply watch the breath without experimenting with it, you never really learn the breath. As the Buddha said with regard to the Four Noble Truths, there are three levels to learning these things. One is simply to know what they are, and then the second is to know what to do with them. In this case, we’re working on concentration, which is a path to the end of suffering. What do you do with it? You develop it. It’s not the case that when a moment of concentration arises, you simply watch it come and watch it go. You want to observe it to see, “How does it come? How does it go?” so that you can bring it on more often. Once it’s come, you want to figure out how to make it stay. Concentration isn’t something that you can watch directly to begin with, so you watch instead off a little bit to the side. You watch the breath. In the course of watching the breath, the concentration will come, without you having to think about whether it’s concentration or not. Just focus as continually as you can on the breath, for it’s only when you’ve fully mastered it that you really know it. So right now we’re learning about it. Experiment to see what long-breathing feels like, short-breathing feels like. Deep or shallow, heavy or light. Try to be good friends with the breath, because after all, it’s one of those friends like in the chant just now. It’s going to stick with you until you die. And if you get to know it, it can help you until you die. It gives you a good place to stay, and it can help with different diseases in the body. For example, when you have headaches, you can think of the breath going down your back, down to your feet, down to your hands. That helps take a lot of the pressure off of the blood circulating in the head, which causes the headache. You can think of it going down the front of your neck. Not just the in-and-out breath, but the general energy in the lower back. The energy flowing down, flowing down, flowing down. Even as you’re breathing in, even as you’re breathing out, it flows down, flows down through the neck, down into the chest. That can also take a lot of the pressure off the head. If you have an injury in some spot of the body, you may notice how you tend to tense up around the injury. What can you do to relieve that tension? Where do you focus your attention to get the tightness? To go away. You sort of open the channels to let it drain out. Then you can think of the breath going right through the injury. That way you speed the healing, and also you make the experience of having an injury a lot less of a burden. There’s lots the breath can do for you, if you pay it attention, if you get to know it, if you make it your friend. Think of the meditation as a process of getting acquainted. As in any friendship, there are going to be ups and downs. Some days the breath seems to be the last thing you want to look at, or the breath seems to be not at all interested in being looked at. Sometimes you notice as your mindfulness gets sharper, the breath gets more subtle. It gets harder to keep track of. But if you stick with it, you find that over time you’ve got a good companion here to do all kinds of good things for you. So take some time. This is what’s required to develop a friendship. It takes time and you have to be observant. As the Buddha said, there are four steps to knowing another person. When you want to know the person’s virtue, just watch them. Stay with them and be very observant over time to see how they behave in different situations. If there’s an opportunity to steal and they take it, an opportunity to lie and they take it, there’s not much virtue in that person. But the only way you’re going to know this is to stay with them for a long period of time. Some people come on really, really friendly in the beginning, but you have to ask why. So you watch to see if you can trust them. If you want to know a person’s purity, you have to have dealings with them, i.e., business dealings, making trades. How honest are they in their trades? If you want to know a person’s powers of endurance, watch them in adversity. When things get difficult and tough, how do they behave? If you want to know the person’s discernment, ask questions. See how they go about approaching a question. This way you get a sense of, “Is this a person you can trust? Is this a person that you really want to have as a friend?” It’s the same with the breath. You’ve got to learn how to ask questions of the breath, but it’s a different kind of question. You’re not asking if the breath has discernment. What you’re basically doing is developing your discernment around the breath. What would longer breathing be like? Shorter? Faster? Slower? What are the different ways you have of conceiving the breath? When you breathe in, what is the mental picture you have of what the breath is doing? Where does the breath come in? Where does it go out? What different levels of the breath are there in the body? You sit here, feeling your body, having a sense of the body from the inside. Just tell yourself that that sense of the body sitting here, that’s breath, too. If you didn’t have breath going through, now this is not just the air in the lungs we’re talking about here, this is the energy flowing through the body. If there weren’t that energy flow in the body, you wouldn’t know that you had a body here. When you look at the body in that way, thinking of it as all breath, how does that change the way you breathe? What new possibilities does it open up? If you think of it just as a solid lump sitting here, you can’t do much with the lump except just move it around when you get up. But if you think of it as breath energy and it’s flowing, where does it feel blocked? Where does it feel like it’s flowing? What other areas could be opened up? How can you change the flow? Is it going up? Is it going down? Or is it just going around? Energy in the different parts of the body, does it feel coordinated? Or are the different parts of the body working at cross-purposes? You see what happens? You change the concept and that changes the question. It opens new possibilities. So if you learn how to ask questions and then follow through and see what answers you get, you begin to realize there’s an awful lot to explore here. How does your breathing relate to thoughts? When a thought appears in the mind, does that change the way you breathe? When the thought arises, do you notice it? Notice any tension appearing in the body. That’s connected to the arising of the thought. It’s a change in the breath energy. What happens if you release that tension? There are lots of questions to ask, lots of things to explore. Years back, someone asked John Lee why he taught breath meditation. He said, “The breath is just in and out. Are you going to get any discernment watching just in and out?” John Lee said, “If that’s all you see, that’s all you get.” But if you learn how to look in a different way, you realize there’s an awful lot to learn here about the relationship between events in the mind and events in the body, how you can use the breath to soothe the body, how you can use the breath to soothe the mind, how you can use thoughts in the mind to have an effect on the breath. As Ajahn Fuhrman said, as you meditate here, take the breath as your basic principle, as the basic foundation for the meditation, and all the other issues that come up in the meditation, try to relate them to the breath, either the in-and-out breath or the more subtle breath energies in the body. When you find that the breath has an awful lot to offer, that’s another piece of advice from Ajahn Fuhrman. He said, “Learn how to play with the meditation.” Now, “playing” here, he didn’t mean playing around in a desultory sort of way. It’s more like a young person getting a guitar and wanting to learn the guitar. So you just keep playing with it, experimenting, trying different chords. Learn how to do a little music theory. Learn how to train your ear. Learn what to listen for, and then just experiment. Sometimes, playing around in that way, you actually become a great musician. A lot of the great musicians didn’t have formal training or had just a little bit of formal training. What they had a lot of was one in-and-out interest, and two, a willingness to put in the effort and to experiment. In other words, the guitar, or whatever the instrument, captures their imagination. This is a basic principle in all skills. They’ve done studies of people who are really good at a particular skill and people who are really, really good at the skill. What’s the difference? The ones who are exceptional are the ones who, one, have a very strong sense that if you don’t master that particular skill, there are going to be problems. But if you do master the skill, it’s got a lot of benefits. The issues that come up and arise in the skill capture their imagination. Sometimes it’s not just the skill, it’s your mind that learns how to capture its own imagination. So learn to look at the breath, learn to look at the meditation in a way that captures your imagination, and you’ll find that it’ll take you far.

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