Lessons Learned in the Breath

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We are here to train the mind. So why do we focus on the breath? It’s because there are a lot of good lessons to learn from the breath. One of the first is to see how much we shape the breath all the time. The other day someone had a question, “Why is it that in this method you’re told to adjust the breath, where in almost every other method you’re told simply to watch the breath as it is?” Well, what is the breath as it is? It’s already being adjusted. We have our preferences, but they tend to be subterranean. We don’t notice what they are. We’re not really aware of what they are. It’s what it looks like when we just sit there with the breath. The breath comes in, the breath goes out. We’re simply with the breath as it is. But we’re actually with the breath as it’s been shaped. It’s been shaped by some unconscious perceptions of what the breath process is, subconscious feelings of pleasure or pain. You breathe in until it feels uncomfortable, so you breathe out until it feels uncomfortable and you breathe in until it feels uncomfortable. And if you tell yourself, “This is just the breath as it is,” you miss out on an awful lot. You have to understand that you already are fashioning the breath. And by consciously fashioning the breath, you bring a lot of these issues out into the open. What is your unconscious perception of the breath? What is your underlying perception or mental image of the breathing process? When you breathe in and breathe out, where is the decision to stop breathing in, to start breathing out, and then to stop breathing out and start breathing in again? Where is that decision made? On what basis? And you’ll often find that the decision to stop breathing in, as you begin this process, trips you up. Everything gets tight, constricted. It’s like asking a centipede to think about all the different legs that it’s using as it walks. The poor little centipede and its little tiny brain, it would be too much for it. It would trip all over the place. But we’re not centipedes. We’re human beings. We have a greater capacity of learning how to be sensitive, to watch, to become aware of things. This is why the early steps of a John Lee’s breath meditation are to be aware of how the breath feels, where it’s comfortable, where it’s not. The purpose is to sensitize you to what’s going on. Knowing that in the beginning it’s going to be awkward and it’s going to be based on misunderstandings, but this is how you check your misunderstandings, by acting on them for a while and seeing what results you get. That’s an important lesson for the mind. We’re here to catch ourselves being deluded, which is one of the hardest things to see. By definition, delusion can’t see itself. But if you very carefully act on a particular assumption and then see what results you’re getting, that gives you some opportunity to begin to see through your delusion. You start seeing connections. What kind of ideas lead to stress and strain and suffering? What kind of ideas don’t? It’s through trial and error in this way that you learn. Then you begin to see through your delusions. You see a certain assumption is causing stress and strain. You learn how to drop it, trying to find another assumption that works better. For instance, when you assume that the breath is the air coming in and out through the lungs, you’re going to breathe in a certain way. But it may not be the most comfortable way possible. So try other ways of conceiving the breath. Think of it as the energy charge going through all the cells of the body, in the same way that electricity goes through atoms. There’s a lot of space, and the charge doesn’t have any clear boundaries. So think of the breath, think of the body, as a breath body without any clearly defined limits or clearly defined boundaries. This is a movement of energy. You tell yourself that all the sensations you have that let you know there is a body here, these are part of the breath energy. If this were a breath, what kind of breath would it be? You find some parts of the body seem more blocked or more solid than others. That’s a sign that the energy is fighting. It’s not coordinated. So what can you do to make it more coordinated? Again, thinking of the energy being able to go in any direction at all. You might ask yourself your perception of where the direction of the energy is. Where are the different parts of the body right now? Are they really there? Say, a pain that seems to be in the back. Is it really in the back, or is it actually something in front? If you were to label it as a pain in the front of the body, how would that change the dynamic? How would that change the flow of the breath? In other words, learn how to play with your perceptions and see what changes you get in your experience of the breathing process. If you can’t play with your perceptions like this, it places a real limit on your ingenuity. And this, again, is an important lesson you need in the meditation for training the mind. Because so many of our attachments are based on our inability to think. In any other way, our thoughts, our opinions, get narrowed down. And then we have ourselves cornered. And only if you can learn how to think outside the box can you get yourself out. So experiment with different approaches. Experiment with different ways of conceiving the breath, conceiving the flow of the breath, so that the sense of the body gets gentler, more fluid. In this way, you get practice in thinking in terms of the four Noble Truths. In other words, looking for the stress and trying to figure out what the cause is, what the craving is that leads to that stress. What views are you clinging to? What habitual ways of breathing are you clinging to? There’s that one form of clinging that’s called clinging to habits and practices. This applies to your breath as much as to anything else. And then what qualities of mind do you need to bring in order to see through the clinging and to peel away the clinging? It’s looking at things in terms of what’s called appropriate attention, thinking in terms of the four Noble Truths, looking at your experience of the body in terms of the four Noble Truths, erasing ignorance with regard to the breath. Because that’s the ignorance that the Buddha has you focus on. There are lots of different things you could be ignorant about and that we are ignorant about, but they’re not really important. Our main ignorance, the one that leads to suffering, is not looking at things in terms of the four Noble Truths, not understanding the duties that follow on seeing things in terms of the four Noble Truths. In other words, sorting things out into stress, its cause, its cessation, the path, through its cessation. Realizing you have to comprehend the stress, abandon the cause, realize cessation through developing the path. This gives you practice in thinking in those terms. So as you focus on the breath, you train the mind. You expand its range of skills, its range of abilities. You focus on a way of thinking, a way of looking at things, that really does cut through the problem of suffering, that does cut through your ignorance. So the breath is not a distraction. It’s training ground. The more ingenuity you bring to the breath, the more sensitivity you bring to the process of breathing. The more those qualities of mind get developed. So it’s not a question of using the breath simply as a place for the mind to settle down and then turn to the real work of, say, insight practice. You gain a lot of insights while you’re working with the breath. So don’t look at it simply as a waystation or something you want to get through so you can get on to the real stuff. The real stuff is right here—the lessons you learn as you deal with the breath, with sensitivity, ingenuity, learning how to keep track of it, looking at it in and of itself. In other words, even though you know that it is part of the path which eventually someday will lead you to a place beyond the breath, you focus on it right now, in and of itself. The back of your mind, you know that it’s a path. But the main point of your attention should be that you really want to learn what’s going on with the breath. Give yourself fully to the breath. Immerse yourself in the breath. See what lessons it has to teach you. So that you fully are thinking about breath, not saying, “Well, I’m going to stay here until I’m done with it and then I get on to the big stuff of awakening.” Look for the awakening in the breath and not something that comes after. That’s the only place where you’ll find it. you

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