A Blameless Happiness

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Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Breathe in, breathe out, and ask yourself, “Where in the body do you feel the sensation of breathing most clearly?” Maybe in the nose, the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the abdomen, or in and out. Notice how the in-breath feels and how the out-breath feels. And ask yourself, “Does it feel comfortable? Does it feel pleasurable? What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” You might want to start with a couple of good long deep in and out breaths to see how that feels. And if it feels good, stick with it. If not, you can change. You can ask yourself, “How would shorter breathing feel? More shallow? Heavier or lighter? How about in short and out long, or in long and out short? And how short is short? How long is long? What would feel just right? What kind of breathing would feel gratifying?” Breathing is an important step in the breath meditation. It’s learning how to breathe in and out with a sense of fullness, breathe in and out with a sense of ease and pleasure. Being able to find this sense of pleasure simply by breathing is an important skill, because it doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. How many pleasures we have in life depend on placing a burden on others. Most of the pleasures that most people look for are that kind of pleasure. But here’s a pleasure that places no burden on anyone. Simply the sense of ease that comes from being sensitive to how the breathing feels and allows the body to breathe in whatever way feels best. After all, the breath is the basic energy that keeps life going. And it only stands to reason that any way of breathing that feels good would be good for you. It’s good for the body and good for the mind. The more you sensitize yourself to this kind of pleasure, the better. The more you can tap into it whenever you need it. The Buddha once said that wisdom begins with a question, “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term wealth or unhappiness? What, when I do it, will be blameless, skillful?” Skillful in the sense that it gives rise to a happiness that creates no burdens. It gives rise to a happiness that nobody else would want to destroy. If you gain happiness because you have a certain job, a certain partner, a certain possession that takes something away from someone else, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to try to fight that happiness. It’s not safe. And even if you can maintain it as long as you live, still the body ages. It’s subject to illness, subject to death. And a truly lasting happiness would be something that would last beyond death. Now, of course, the breath itself is going to go when the body dies, or this breath will go. But the qualities you build into the mind as you focus on the breath, those don’t die. They go with the mind. For, as the Buddha says, there’s an unconditioned happiness that lies even deeper inside, and this is a practice that leads you there. That’s a happiness that’s totally untouched by aging, illness, and death. It’s good that we reflect on where our happiness comes from, how skillful it is, how blameless it is, how lasting it is. That’s how we become wise. You probably know the story of the Buddha prior to his awakening. After being disappointed in the different teachings that were available in his time, he went off in the forest alone. Five other ascetics followed him, and he set to seeing how far he had to go. He went as far as he could drive his mind away from being dependent on pleasure of any kind at all. He subjected himself to all kinds of austerities. Self-torture is what it came down to. And he did this for six years. And he finally realized that that led nowhere. So he stopped to think, “Would there be another way to awakening?” He remembered when he was a child, sitting alone under a tree, and his mind had fallen into a deep state of concentration, a good sense of rapture, a sense of well-being. And he asked himself, “Could that be the way to awakening?” And something inside him said, “Yes.” He said, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure? It comes with that state of concentration.” Because he’d been doing everything he could not to indulge in any pleasure at all, he realized that this was a pleasure that was blameless. It placed no affliction on anyone. And at the same time, it allowed the mind to be clear. You think about most sensual pleasure. In order to enjoy a sensual pleasure, the mind tends to narrow down. It focuses on a few details it really likes and blocks out all things it doesn’t like. And if you’re creating any harm, you tend to block out that harm as well. In other words, you can enjoy sensual pleasures only when you block out huge areas of reality. So it can be harmful to other people and harmful to the mind. Whereas the pleasure that comes simply from focusing the breath on the mind is a pleasure that’s not harmful at all. It leads to clarity. It’s unburdensome. And even though it’s not the end in and of itself, it’s a way to an end that is truly unconditioned, because it induces that sense of clarity. The mind can see a lot more clearly when it settles down like this. Because it’s harming no one, it can trace back all the connections to what it’s doing and what the results are. This is why this is a happiness that’s skillful as well. So this is an important skill we develop as we learn to develop a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, simply by the way we breathe. By most people’s standards, this would be a pretty austere happiness. But you think of the Buddha coming from the other side, having gone for six years of self-torture, denying himself all but the least amount of food, trying to stop his breath, getting so thin that when he rubbed his stomach you could feel his spine. So when we think about the Middle Way, we have to remember how far the extreme of self-torture can actually go. It’s a happiness that comes simply from breathing. It may seem to us not all that exciting, but it is lasting. And lasting happiness, lasting well-being, is something we all need. If you come from a sense of solid happiness from within, your actions are bound to be less harmful, your words are bound to be less harmful, your thoughts are bound to be less harmful, because you’re coming from a position of strength where you don’t feel threatened by anyone else, a position of well-being where you see no need to put any hardship on anyone else. So this kind of happiness is not only a gift to yourself, it’s a gift to other people. Most kinds of happiness and pleasure you take. With this, you partake of it, but you also give, which is why this is a skill that’s really worth mastering. It’s part of your life. It’s part of that answer to the Buddha’s question, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What will I do that’s skillful? What will I do that’s blameless?” That’s how wisdom begins, and this practice is one of the ways of embodying the answer to that question.

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