The Breath In and Of Itself

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Each time you meditate, remind yourself you’re doing something that’s really good to do. Get yourself in the right mood that this is a special opportunity. You’ve got some seclusion. Nobody’s yelling at you about deadlines. No family issues. Nothing needs to impinge on your mind right now. Even though there may be issues outside of the monastery that you’re thinking about, let them go for the time being, because your mind needs a place to rest. If it’s going to handle those issues, it needs to be able to gather its strength. This is why we come out to a place of physical seclusion like this, away from your normal entanglements, so you can have a chance to be here on your own and get in touch with what’s really important inside, which is the state of your mind. That’s physical seclusion. Of course, it is easy when you come to a place like this to start thinking about all the other issues you’ve left behind. In other words, thoughts of past and future, and in particular, cravings about past and future. Those, as the Buddha said, are the mind’s companions. You’ve got to develop mental seclusion as well. In other words, find something that’s right here in the present moment, just in and of itself, and focus on that. You’ve got the body sitting here. You’ve got feelings, mind states. You’ve got mental qualities that are either skillful or unskillful. You could focus on any of those in and of itself. The body, though, is usually the easiest. It’s the most blatant. If you start focusing on mental qualities or feelings, they begin to spin off into stories, and then you find yourself back with your old companions. So focus on the breath in and of itself. Breath here meaning not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the sense of energy flow in the body. Any sensation that you have in any part of the body that goes along with the in-breath goes along with the out-breath. It lets you know that now you’re breathing in, now you’re breathing out. You can choose any spot in the body where you have those sensations. It might be in the middle of the head, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, the base of the throat. Choose one spot that you like and allow your awareness to settle there. Allow the sensations at that spot to be comfortable. Create a sense of space and ease around them. So you’re not bottling things up or interfering with the flow of the breath or the blood. Things flow in, things flow out, and as they flow past that spot, they feel good. Allow your awareness to settle right there. If any thoughts come bubbling up, just let them go up into the atmosphere and burst. In other words, you don’t have to follow them. You don’t have to straighten them out. If encouraging thoughts come along, fine, take the encouragement, but let them go. If discouraging thoughts come along, let them go, too. Just try to be with the awareness of the sensation of breath coming in and breath going out, in and of itself. In other words, you don’t have to connect the breath with the other thoughts of the body and from there with thoughts of how your body looks to other people, or whether it’s getting old or getting sick, or any of those things. Just you’ve got the body in and of itself doing its body thing right here. Try to keep your awareness on that level as much as you can. And you find if you can maintain this awareness, keep it settled, it’s healing. It feels good for the body, it feels good for the mind. If the breath energy is good, that affects other elements in the body. The breath is called the bodily fabricator or the bodily fabrication. It affects your heartbeat, it affects the different processes throughout the body. The way you breathe affects your posture. So try to breathe in a comfortable way. If you feel any sense of tension or tightness anywhere, allow it to loosen up. If your mind wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Try to develop a very matter-of-fact attitude about it, that each time you come back you’re strengthening your mindfulness. You may not like the idea that your mindfulness is weak or your alertness is weak, but whatever you’re going to do, you start where you are. And each time you come back, you’re strengthening things. This is a path where we develop qualities in the mind. We’re not simply sitting here watching things passively, or accepting things passively, or just noting things and allowing them to pass. You note things and you figure out, does this help with the breath meditation, or does it help keep you with the breath, or does it pull you away from the breath? If it pulls you away from the breath, you don’t follow it. If it helps with the breath, you bring it to bear on how you’re breathing, how you’re being aware of the breath. You may decide after a while that the rhythm of breathing that felt good to begin with doesn’t feel so good anymore. That’s something you can think about. You can talk to yourself about that. You can ask yourself, “What rhythm of breathing would feel better?” Longer? Shorter? Heavier? Lighter? Experiment. You’re not going to really feel comfortable with the breath until you’ve been able to experiment with it for a while. It’s like getting a new stereo. You have to fiddle with the dials for a while. Turn it way up. You decide, “That’s too loud.” Turn it way down. “Well, that’s too soft.” Try to find the spot in the dial that feels just right, sounds just right. Then you adjust the bass and you adjust the treble. Then you try the radio receiver. You try to tune in to a particular station until there’s no static at all. You’re right on target with the frequency. You find there are lots of stations out there, the stations with total garbage, trash music, trash talk. But then there are stations that are really good. So you learn to tune in to those. In other words, there are all kinds of sensations in the body right now. You tune in to the comfortable ones and try to stay tuned. It’s just like the fact that there are all the frequencies from all the radio stations in Los Angeles and San Diego and Tijuana and who knows what, going through the room right now. But if you had a radio right here, you’d choose whichever station had the music or the discussion that you wanted to hear. The choice is yours. It’s the same with the breath and the body. There are lots of different sensations in the body right now. Some hot ones, some cold ones, some constricted ones. Try to tune in first to the ones that feel open and pleasant. At the very least, don’t feel tense or tight. Then keep that sense of openness and ease as constant as you can as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Try not to squeeze it when you breathe in, not to squeeze it when you breathe out. Allow it to stay the same all the way through each in-and-out breath, and then the next in-and-out breath, and it stays the same, the same, the same. It’s going to start feeling really good. Then you can think of it spreading around the body. John Lee recommends that you actually think of the breath going down the spine, not the legs. Of course, this is not the air in the lungs again. It’s the energy that accompanies the in-breath, that brings the breath in and allows it to go out. Think of it coming down the spine. If you sense any tension or tightness in the spine, let any of the vertebrae allow it to relax. So it feels that as soon as the breath comes in, it goes all the way down the spine and out your toes, with nothing to interfere. Then you can think of it going down the shoulders and out the arms to the tips of the fingers, coming in the middle of the chest and going down through the different organs in your torso. Find a sense of fullness and ease. Allow it to stay. All little spots of fullness in the body connecting up. This is where you’re tuning in to the comfortable potentials in the body, which is an important skill in the meditation. In that chant we had just now on the Noble Eightfold Path, right concentration starts with a sense of ease. The word is sukha. It means ease, pleasure, bliss. It can be subtle or it can be very intense. There’s bhitti, which can be translated as refreshment or rapture. Again, that can be subtle or very intense. It usually starts out fairly subtle, but if you give it time to stay without interfering with it, it grows stronger and stronger. A sense of attachment may develop around it, but that’s okay. You need to hang on to the path. It’s like the Buddha’s simile of the rabbit. We’ve all heard about the raft that goes across the other side of the river. And as soon as you get on the other side of the river, you don’t want to carry it on your head. You just leave it there at the river. What we tend to forget is that while you’re crossing the river, you’ve got to hold on. You hold on to the sense of ease. Learn the sense of balance that allows it to stay. And then make it your support, seeing how long you can keep it going. And if you fall off, get back on again. In other words, you take these potentials for what can give rise to a sense of ease and fullness, and you allow them to develop. That’s our duty with regard to the path. We develop it. We don’t just watch the good things come and go. We take advantage of them. And as for anything that pulls you away from this frame of reference, i.e., the breath in and of itself right here and right now, just allow it to pass away and pass away. This way the concentration can get stronger, more all-encompassing. So the opportunity to develop this skill is a very special opportunity. Bring a sense of confidence to it that this is something really good, and you’re in the right place at the right time to give it your best. If you bring the right attitude to it, then you’ll find that it will repay you many times over.

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