NR True Friends & False

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You have a whole hour here to get on good terms with your breath. This energy flow in the body keeps you alive, brings the air into the lungs, and lets it back out. Without this energy flow, you’d be dead. And it stands to reason that since it’s so essential to life, that if it feels good, it’s going to be good for the body, good for the mind. So give it some space to see what kind of breathing really does feel good right now. Start with a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If not, we can change. Try more shallow breathing, or even deeper breathing. Faster or slower, heavier or lighter. Experiment to see what kind of texture the breathing would feel best for the body right now. You can ask a question. Just pose the question in your mind. What would feel good now? What kind of breath? Just this one breath. What would feel really good? And then ask the same question of the next breath, and the next. And learn to listen to see what the body has to tell you. Because sometimes certain types of breathing may feel good for a while, but after a while they start not feeling so good. So you’ve got to change. As for all your other preoccupations, just let them go. If they come into the mind, they can go out of the mind. You don’t have to chase them out. Any distractions, thoughts of past, thoughts of future, whatever. If they don’t have anything to do with the breath, just let them go. Because they’re going to interfere with your new friendship here, you don’t even have to get on friendly terms with your breath. A lot of those old thoughts are old friends. You know them well. Some of them are good friends, some of them are not-so-good friends. That chant we had just now about friends doesn’t apply only to friends outside. Lots of thoughts you like to pal around with. They’re not necessarily good friends. They’ll cheat you. They promise all kinds of entertainment and pleasure. They can actually lead you to do things, though, that end up being the sort of things you regret. So it’s time to get acquainted with this new friend. And even if you’ve been meditating for a long time, there’s always more to learn about the breath. This energy flow in the body. Because the condition of your body keeps on changing. Some days you feel well and strong, and other days you don’t feel so well. When you’re not feeling so well, see what kind of breath will be good for you. When does a body need to be well? When does it need to be calmed? When you’re not feeling well, where is the breath energy lacking in the body? Because breathing is a whole body process. We think of the lungs expanding. Well, how do the lungs expand? The ribcage has to expand. And when the ribcage expands, what else happens to your body? It changes the balance in different parts of the body. And if you’re really sensitive, you’ll gain a sense that when you’re breathing in, every part of the body, all the way down to your fingers and toes, is involved in the breathing process. And the more you can let the entire body be involved, the better it’s going to be. Because again, this energy is giving life to the body. If there are parts of the body that are cut off, they’re going to have problems. So what you’re learning how to do is learning how to read the condition of the body, read the condition of your mind, and see what the breath can do for both. Because certain kinds of breathing can aggravate bad mental states and can encourage good ones, or encourage good ones. That’s something you have to experiment to find out. There are no books written on this. They may suggest questions you might want to pose in your mind, things you want to look for, but actually noticing connections, that’s something you have to do for yourself. There’s no meditation book anywhere that’s going to explain everything for you and lay it all out so that you don’t have to do any independent observations. The crucial part of the meditation is your own power to observe things for yourself. The meditation books simply raise questions, suggest that you look in areas you might have never thought of looking before, or notice connections where you never thought there was a connection. Because the more you observe, the more you get sensitive both to the body and the mind, and how they interact with the breath, the more you begin to see and understand the big problem in life. Why do we cause suffering for ourselves when we don’t have to? We all want to avoid suffering, we all want to avoid stress and pain, and yet we do things that cause stress, cause pain, cause suffering. It’s one of the big ironies of life. And that’s the major problem. The Buddha had the insight to see that when you pose this problem in this way, you start seeing things about the mind that are more and more important. It encourages you to develop good qualities in mind. It’s just a simple fact that we like pleasure and don’t like pain. That’s his starting point. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha is assuming that we are all basically good by nature, but he never assumes that. All he assumes is that we want pleasure, we want happiness, we want ease in our lives. It’s simply that we go about it in the wrong way. We’re ignorant of the connections, why certain actions, certain ways of speaking, certain thoughts cause stress and pain, and others help put an end to it. And if you’re really serious about wanting to be happy, you learn to look for these connections. All he assumes is that you want to avoid the pain, want to be happy, want to find the happiness, and you’re willing to take some time, put some energy, put some effort into the practice. Wisdom, he said, starts with the question, “What will I do that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom here being, one, realizing there’s a connection between your actions and the happiness, and two, realizing that the long-term is going to be a lot more valuable than just the short-term. Based on that, you start reflecting about how your happiness relates to the happiness of other people. And you begin to realize that if your happiness depends on their misery, they’re not going to stand for it, because they want to be happy, too. That brings another quality in, which is compassion. You have to think about their happiness, their pain. Take that into consideration when you’re looking for happiness. And then you actually have to look at your actions. Actions here meaning not only the things you do with your body, but also the words you say and the things you think. If you think about doing something, you anticipate that it’s going to cause harm, either for other people or you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. If, while you’re doing it, you see some harm arising, then you stop. If you see no harm arising, go ahead, continue with the action. And then when it’s done, you reflect on what the real results were over the long-term. And if you see there’s any harm, you talk it over with someone else who’s also practicing, and then resolve not to repeat that. If there’s no harm, then you take joy that you’re developing the practice. You develop purity in your actions this way. In other words, you’re not simply hoping to act in a way that causes no harm, but you actually learn from experience what ways cause harm, and you learn to avoid them. What ways of acting don’t cause harm, go ahead and do them. So that your actions really are in line with your intentions, and you’re willing to learn from mistakes and then resolve not to repeat them. So if you’re really serious about finding true happiness, you discover it’s not a greedy or selfish thing. It involves wisdom, compassion, purity. Those are qualities of the Buddha himself. So all he’s asking is that you take your desire for happiness, and you take it seriously. If you really want to be happy, you’ve got to be careful about what you do, realizing that your actions really do make all the difference. Where do they come from? They come from your intentions. How do you train your intentions? You learn to become more sensitive. This is one of the things meditation does. It gives you something to focus on in the present moment. The first thing you’re going to be aware of is the fact that you’re not staying focused. You’re wandering off. If you didn’t have something to stay focused on, you wouldn’t really be that sensitive to how your mind wanders all over the place. So you’ve learned a lesson right there. How do you learn how to stay with the breath more and more consistently? Try to make it more comfortable, more interesting. There’s a sense of ease in the breath. Allow it to expand into different parts of the body, to flow into different parts of the body. It helps to maximize your sense of well-being in the present moment, which makes it easier to act in a wise and skillful way. If you’re feeling irritated, part of the problem is, “I don’t care about this, I want some pleasure right now.” That’s an unskillful friend, the one that doesn’t care about consequences. That’s the friend who is good only in word, as we chanted just now. The true friends are the ones who say, “Let’s learn how to be happy in a way that harms nobody.” Learning how to find a sense of ease and well-being simply through breathing doesn’t oppress anybody at all. It doesn’t oppress you, it doesn’t oppress other people. It’s a perfectly harmless way of being happy. It doesn’t cost any money. So it’s a good skill to have. These are the best skills, the ones that take something really close to you and allow you to develop a sense of ease, well-being, out of things that are totally free, always available. So you find your mind at peace. You’re not wandering off with other friends, asking, “What are they going to provide for you? What kind of happiness can they give you?” And they may seem harmless. You’re just sitting here thinking about things. But a lot of the things that we think about, if we continue thinking about them for long periods of time, would lead us to act in certain ways that would not be so harmless. So we can’t say that just thinking is harmless. It can easily develop bad qualities in the mind, bad habits in the mind. The Buddha talks about hindrances, in other words, qualities of mind that prevent you from staying with one object and being really alert and very focused on that object. Sensual desire, ill-will, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt and uncertainty. These are all false friends. We tend to hang out with them, but they don’t really help us at all. And it’s good to see them, simply as that, false friends. Friends that promise a lot but don’t really deliver, lead you to do certain things, and then, when the police come and get you, they run off. That kind of friend. So recognize them for what they are. Realize that the breath has been here, it’s been coming in and going out all your life. It hasn’t asked for much. But if you give it more and more attention, you realize that this friend here has a lot to offer, things you might not have expected otherwise. But give it some time, give it some space. Listen to it. Read it. See what it tells you about what the body needs. As you get more and more sensitive to it, it’s going to be more and more helpful. So it’s one of those unassuming friends. But if you pay attention to it, listen to it, you’ll find that it’s one of the best friends you could ever have. Thank you very much.

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