Befriending the Breath

May 7, 2009

We have a whole hour here to make friends with the breath, which requires two things. One, that you’re observant, and two, that you spend a lot of time with it. Otherwise, you don’t really get to know it. So you’re trying to make a firm intention that you’re going to stay right here and be with the breath, and try to protect that intention. In other words, a lot of other intentions are going to come along. And you have to keep remembering, no, you’re not going to play with them. It’s like your old friends see that you’ve got a lot of free time right now and they’re going to come out and they want to play with you. But you know what your old friends are like. They take you around the block and there’s really nothing to show for it. You want a friend that can really help you, a friend who will point you to worthwhile things, as it says in the chant. A lot of your old friends were friends in ruinous fun. So you’ve got to keep reminding yourself, one, you’re going to stay with the breath, and two, you’re not going to get involved with those other friends. You’ve got to help strengthen that intention to stay with the breath here. Try to notice how it feels. Get very, very sensitive to how the breathing feels, where you sense it in the body, whether there are comfortable sensations or uncomfortable sensations. Where it feels light, where it feels heavy, where it feels trapped, where it feels like it’s flowing smoothly. Take some time to investigate this breath property in the body, and to begin to notice that it’s not just a sensation of air coming in and out through the nose. There’s a rise and fall in the chest. There’s a rise and fall in the abdomen. There are some very subtle sensations that flow all the way throughout the body, over the shoulders, down the arms, out to the fingers, down the back, out the legs, to the tips of the toes, in the torso. Keep reminding yourself that if you really want to understand this breath energy in the body and get the most out of it, you’ve got to spend a lot of time with it. The mind does have this tendency to want to jump around. It wants to network with this friend, network with that friend, check up on this one, see how they’re doing, watch out for any trouble that’s going to come along. This hindrance, they call it, of restlessness and anxiety. Part of the mind says, “You’ve got to keep jumping around from here to there to make sure all the fronts are covered.” Sometimes, that’s a useful policy, but not always, especially not right now. You want to train the mind in a new skill, the skill of staying with something really useful, something really skillful, something that can take you deeper inside. It’s unlike a lot of the thoughts we think. The breath is here all the time. As long as we’re alive, the breath is coming in, going out, or it’s still. Even when it’s a still breath, it’s still breath energy, which you can focus on. So it’s an object you can really melt into. Otherwise, you’re always poised to leap. As soon as a thought gets uninteresting, or it gets unpleasant, or you just get tired of it, you jump. As soon as you land on another thought, part of you is already tensed up to make the next jump. So tell yourself, “Here’s a place you don’t have to jump from. You can stay here. You can make this your home.” That’s one of the traditional terms for getting the mind in concentration. Vihara Dhamma is a quality that forms a home for the mind, a place where you feel that you can stay comfortably. It’s like having a true friend who will never let you down. In Thay, they talk about your eating friends, the ones you have a good time with, and then there are friends who are willing to die for you. They’ll stick with you through thick and thin and help you even when you die. That’s the kind of friend the breath can be. But you have to be that kind of friend to it, too. In other words, you have to stick with it for long periods of time. Otherwise, it’s very shy. It doesn’t show all of its potentials. So be patient, quiet. It’s like making friends with a wild animal. Wild animals are very wary, but with enough patience and enough kindness, you can make friends. And with enough interest, being really observant and watching for long periods of time, you can get so that the wild animals will approach you. I heard of a meditation teacher back east who would go out in the woods behind her house and she would stand very still with a birdseed in her hand. She did this long enough that eventually the wild birds would come and eat right out of her hand. Instead of standing there, she had to learn how to relax into her standing position so it wasn’t tense. It didn’t wear her out to stand there. She finally got used to resting in that posture. So find a spot in the body where you feel that you can easily settle down, stay here. It might be in the middle of the head, the middle of the chest, in the abdomen, anywhere in the body. Where you feel that your attention can settle in, settle in, things settle down and begin to fit together. All those scattered little parts of your mind, they all come together and they click into place so that you’re fully here with the breath, so you can fully observe it and get more acquainted with it and all of its many aspects. Because the breath isn’t just in and out. There’s breath energy that flows up as you breathe in. There’s breath energy that flows down as you breathe in. If it flows up too much, you tend to get a headache. If it flows down too much, you get dizzy. So you try to balance things. There’s breath energy that comes in and out. There’s breath energy that comes in from the back and breath energy that comes in from the front. As you get more sensitive to it, you begin to realize this breath energy that’s constantly waiting to come in through the pores of your skin, so you don’t have to pull it in. The more the different energies in the body get connected, the less you have to breathe. They nourish one another. They connect with one another. So the body can get more and more still, and the mind can experience even a greater sensation of stillness. So there’s a lot to learn here, a lot to get acquainted with. Just watch out for those old friends who want to come and play, or who make demands on you. They’ve pretty much shown you all they have to offer. There’s nothing really new there. When you catch yourself running off with one, then ask yourself, “What do you want out of this? What do you expect out of this?” It’s pretty rare that a really new and original thought is going to come along as you meditate. Most of the time, it’s just the same old stuff over and over again. And even if it is new and original, tell yourself, “This is not the time for that. Just let it go. Let it go.” John Foong used to say that any insights that come up in a meditation, you don’t have to jot them down, you don’t have to memorize them. If they’re really genuine insights, they’ll do their work right here and now, and they’ll stick with you. If they’re not, then just let them go. If they’re not really genuine, why do you have to memorize them? What insight is all about is that it opens you up to see things in the mind that you hadn’t understood before, patterns that control the mind. It also shows you the way to get free of them. So if the insight doesn’t free you right now, just let it go. It’s not the right time or place for that insight. You just stay with the breath. As you do it, it’ll develop a sense of ease, a sense of fullness. A sense of refreshment. Allow that to spread through the different parts of the body. See if you can maintain it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, so you don’t squeeze the breath out too much and you don’t pull it too harshly when you come in. Find that point of connectedness. Where all the breath energies in the body link up with one another, a point of balance. Allow yourself just to melt into it, so that sense of your being in one part of the body and the breath being in another part of the body begins to dissolve. They come together as a sense of oneness that springs the mind to a deeper stage of consciousness. They create an even greater sense of refreshment and fullness. These are some of the things you want to explore. Don’t think of the breath as being tedious, because you’re going to miss a lot of its subtleties if you do. The mind is going to jump off someplace else. It’s going to run off with its old friends. But you’ve seen enough of those old friends. Now it’s time for new friends. One really big new friend that has lots to offer. It’ll lead to a sense of well-being and peace. You can’t really find that anywhere else. So try to strengthen your resolve, strengthen your intention to develop this friendship. Be sensitive, be observant, watch for long periods of time. If anyone else comes along and suggests you want to go play someplace else, you say, “Not now. Maybe some other time, but not now.” You’ve got something more interesting to do, something more rewarding. So keep your intention clear, keep it solid, keep your values to yourself clear. Why are you here? What’s important and what’s not? This sense of priorities is an important part of the meditation. It’s not just a technique. There’s a set of values that goes behind the technique. It reminds you that true happiness comes from a trained mind. True happiness comes from what they call admirable friends. That applies both to friends outside and the kind of friendship you develop inside. The friendship you develop with more mindfulness and alertness. The friendship you develop with a breath. All other practice lies in developing these friendships as much as you can.

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