Healing Breath

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There’s a passage in the Canon where one of the Buddha’s students is sick. When the Buddha goes to teach him the seven factors of awakening, then the student recovers. And there’s another time when the Buddha himself is sick, and one of his students comes and recites for him the seven factors for awakening, and the Buddha recovers. So it’s been a tradition that these teachings are healing, both for the body and especially for the mind, because it’s the diseases of the mind that are most important. So as we meditate, it’s good to recall these qualities, to use them to treat whatever diseases we have in our minds. And it’s especially important to bring them to the breath as we meditate, trying to develop each of these seven qualities in our breathing. So the breathing can be healing and healthy, both for the body and for the mind. The first one is mindfulness. Mindfulness here means any of the four foundations of mindfulness, or four establishings of mindfulness, which entail three qualities. First, there’s mindfulness itself, which means the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you just focus on the breath, just in and of itself, as a sensation. Notice where in the body you sense it, but try to keep in mind that you’re going to stay with the breath. And the second quality is alertness. That’s the actual watching. Watching the mind is to make sure it stays with the breath, and watching the breath is to see how comfortable it is. The third quality is ardency, where you make the effort to do this skillfully. The mind feels at ease with the breath. It’s not being trapped or tied down in a way that it feels that it’s losing its freedom. But it’s not treating it so casually that it just sort of slips in and slips out. This quality of ardency actually includes the next two factors for awakening, because the second one is called analysis of qualities, and it refers to qualities of the mind, whether they’re skillful or not. It’s probably the most important distinction in the Buddha’s teachings. Some things are skillful, some things are not, based on the results they give, both now and on into the future. So you have to learn how to read your mind when you’re coming to the breath. Are you coming in a skillful way or an unskillful way? Do the notions you have about meditation get in the way, or are they actually helpful? And the next quality is persistence, which means that once you notice that something is unskillful, you do your best to abandon it. Abandoning here means that when you notice that you’re doing something unskillful, you stop doing it. You try to make sure you don’t pick it up again. As for skillful qualities, if you see that they’re lacking, you try to bring them into being. And once they’re there, you try to maintain them so that they grow. So those are the basic principles in what we’re doing here. You want to be mindful, alert, ardent. The ardent scene, including the element of wisdom, which sees what’s skillful and what’s not in your mind, together with the effort to encourage what’s skillful and to just abandon what’s not. So you want to bring these qualities to the breath. As John Lee once said, the breath is like a solvent for medicine. The qualities of mind are the actual medicine itself. So you want to be alert to how the breath feels. When the Buddha gives his breath instructions, he starts out by saying, “Bring mindfulness to the fore,” and then very mindfully breathe in, breathe out. He doesn’t say where you focus on the breath. You can focus anywhere in the body where you feel the sensation of breathing. And you try to become sensitive to variations in the breath. Notice when the breath is longer, when it’s shorter, when it’s deeper, when it’s more shallow, when it’s heavier or lighter. Notice the effect that these different ways of breathing have on the body. So find one spot where it’s easy to stay focused on the sensation of breathing and begin to get a sense of what kind of breathing is going on. Learn how to read the breathing. Become sensitive to its variations. And then stay there until you find that the breath gets more comfortable, more at ease. In the texts, they talk about spreading your awareness to fill the whole body. To be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. And then after that, to calm the effects of the breath on the body. If you find any way of breathing that feels harsh or disruptive to the body, then you abandon it. Breathe in ways that feel soothing. Breathe out ways that feel nourishing. And John Lee recommends that you do it the other way around. One, you get the breath so that it feels soothing, and then you spread your awareness to fill the body, at the same time allowing that sense of ease and pleasure to spread to fill the body. Either way works. You might want to experiment to see which way works for you. But the important thing to notice here is that the Buddha recommends that you train yourself to do these things. In other words, you’re not simply dealing with the breath as a given phenomenon. You want to see how there is an element of intention in the breath. That’s why it’s called gaya-sankara, the fabricating element in the body. The word sankara, fabrication, includes the meaning of intention. There is an intentional element in the way you breathe, and you want to sensitize yourself to that. And then you want to calm that, make it more nourishing, make it more soothing and easeful for the body. One of the best ways to keep this soothing and easeful is to try to be as steady in your alertness as possible. If you jump around too much, things don’t have a chance to calm down. And it’s the steadiness of your alertness that requires the breath to get more easeful. Because the uncomfortable breathing that we tend to subject ourselves often to is during the moments when we’re not paying careful attention. We’re jumping around here, jumping around there, and in the midst of the jump, the body can react in different ways. But if your focus is steady, it helps to iron out, smooth out the roughness in the breath. Notice the breath gets nourishing in this way and easeful in this way. The next factor for awakening comes, which is rapture. The word rapture here actually covers a lot of different meanings in English. Refreshment. A sense of fullness. A sense of satisfaction. So it’s important to note that it has a wide range of meanings. Rapture tends to be pretty intense, but a sense of refreshment is something you might notice quite early on, especially if you’ve been breathing in a heavy or uncomfortable way. As soon as you switch to more comfortable breathing, the body feels refreshed. You want to maintain that sense of refreshment. As the Buddha says, you indulge in it. In other words, you allow it to fill the body. You allow the mind to enjoy it, to be refreshed by it as well. It’s a sense of refreshment that really heals and soothes the mind. You are finding a sense of pleasure and ease from within that’s in no way blameworthy. You’re not harming anyone else. You’re not harming yourself. You’re not indulging in unskillful states of mind. When the body’s been nourished and refreshed like this, then it develops a sense of serenity. The mind develops serenity as well. Nothing’s disturbing it, and it’s not disturbing itself. This forms the basis for concentration, when the mind can really settle down and be solidly established in the singleness of its object. Singleness here being both singleness in the sense of having one object and in the sense that this one object, like the breath, fills your awareness of the body. Your perception of breath is such that you can see every sensation in the body as relating to the way you breathe in one way or another, even the flow of energy in your nerves, the flow of energy through your blood vessels. The breath is a very light and quick movement of energy around the solid and liquid and warm parts of the body, and it’s not disturbing anything. As the mind develops a sense of concentration, being solidly established right here, there also comes a sense of equanimity. Again, it’s a sense of lack of disturbance, after the mind’s been refreshed by the sense of pleasure and ease that come from the serenity. It doesn’t even have to focus on them anymore. There’s a sense of stillness, which, as the Buddha said, when you are aware of this equanimity, there’s a very subtle level of pleasure here, but that’s perfectly okay. It’s not disturbing you. It’s not creating any kind of affliction for you at all. Because ordinarily, the mind can make itself afflicted, even with pleasure. It gets attached to it, and then when the pleasure goes away, it’s upset and it struggles again to find the pleasure. And you use that tendency of the mind to get it assessed. You settle it down by supplying it with the pleasure that comes from the breathing. But then there comes a point where the body has been soothed, the mind has been soothed, the sense of well-being is so well-established that you don’t even have to think about it anymore. The mind can enter a state of equanimity, a sense of evenness. All these qualities taken together create a sense of equanimity. They are healing for the mind. And as you infuse them in the breath, both body and mind are soothed and brought to a state of health. The mind isn’t soothing itself. Then it can develop that factor of analysis of qualities even more deeply. That’s when it turns into the faculty of wisdom, the faculty of discernment. You can start digging deeper and deeper into the roots for the mind’s tendency to disturb itself. When you bring the mind to concentration, it doesn’t solve all the mind’s problems, but it does put it in a position where it can start using its discernment. It’s important that we’re not in too great of a hurry to rush through the concentration to get to the discernment, because the work we need to do requires a lot of strength, a lot of equanimity. It requires all these qualities that are developed as you bring the mind into a state of good, healthy concentration through developing the faculty of discernment. The mind itself is the doctor. The Buddha is the kind of doctor who didn’t give injections; he gave people prescriptions. He told them what to do. He gave them an exercise routine. He told them, “These are the medicines you’re going to have to use.” He basically taught the person how to be his or her own doctor. That’s what we’re doing here, learning how to doctor to our own ailments. So it takes a while to develop skill. It takes a while to develop the strength that you need in order to be a very perceptive doctor. But even in the beginning stages, you find that as long as you stick by this principle of being mindful, alert, and ardent, sensitive to how the breathing feels, and doing your best to make the breath soothing and nourishing for the body, you’ve got your course of treatment off to a good start. (crickets chirping)

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