Healing Skills

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When you sit down to meditate, you want to get the body into position and your mind into position. For the body, place your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Straighten your spine so that it’s comfortably straight. You don’t have to be ramrod straight like a soldier. But straighten up so that you’re not putting any undue pressure on the different organs in your torso. Things feel balanced. Place your hands close to your abdomen. Face straight ahead and close your eyes. To get the mind in position, you focus on the breath. Notice where you feel the breath coming in, where you feel it going out. Now, getting the body and mind into position isn’t difficult. The difficult part is keeping them in position. You want to stay in one posture as long as you can. If you find that the posture is getting so painful that it distracts you from the breath, sit with it for a few more minutes and then very mindfully change. Change the position of your legs, adjust your position in a way that helps to allow the blood to flow naturally and easily throughout all the parts of the body. But keeping the body in position is relatively minor. It’s keeping the mind in position that’s the hard part, because it’s very easy for the mind to slip off. It’s the fastest thing to change that you can think of. If you don’t know where you were in the meantime, you thought you were here with the breath and all of a sudden there you are, on the other side of the world. So you very patiently bring the mind back to the sensation of breathing. And then to keep it here, you try to breathe in a very comfortable way. When you notice where the sensation of breathing is strongest, also notice, does it feel comfortable? Or does it feel labored? Does it feel harsh? If it feels harsh or labored, allow it to change. Ask yourself, what would feel better? Longer breathing or shorter breathing? Deeper or more shallow? Heavier or lighter? Faster or slower? And then see how the body responds. Keep this up until you find a rhythm that feels good. Then, as long as that rhythm feels good, you stick with it. Until it doesn’t feel so good anymore, you can change. This requires a couple of qualities. One is mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. And then alertness, watching what’s actually going on. So in this case, you’re keeping the breath in mind. And at the same time, you keep in mind the fact that you could slip off the breath very easily. So you have to be very watchful. Try to notice when the mind begins to reach out away from the breath to find something else. Part of it seems to be with the breath, but the other part is reaching out, like a monkey hanging on a tree. One hand is on the tree trunk, but another hand is reaching out to find another branch to slip off to. When you can sense that, try to get both hands back on the breath. It might be that the breath is not as interesting as it was, or it wasn’t as comfortable or gratifying as it was before. So change the rhythm of the breath. It also helps to have the right understanding of what you’re doing here. The Buddha often compared his teachings to medicine. He was like a doctor, and the practice of his teachings was like giving medicine to yourself. He prescribed some medicine, and you give it to yourself to heal the wounds in the mind. We may often think that we’re wounded by events outside, things that were harsh and things that were difficult to deal with. But the biggest wounds actually come from within—our greed, our aversion, our delusion. So what we’re doing as we’re meditating is we’re giving medicine to the mind. At the same time that we’re giving medicine to the body, because they’re often two sides of the same coin, the breath energy in the body is often a reflection of what’s going on in the mind, and what’s happening with the breath energy is going to have an effect on the mind. So as you stay with the breath and allow the breath to be comfortable, once it’s comfortable, start thinking of it just radiating out, this comfortable breath sensation. It doesn’t have to be just one spot. Think of comfortable energy radiating out from the spot. Think of the different parts of the body. If you feel any sense of blockage, think of that energy just going around it, permeating through it. Otherwise, you don’t have to force the energy out. Just allow it to gradually make its way. Do you feel that when you’re breathing in, there’s a whole body process of the breath energy from the top of the head down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, and out the arms? And all throughout the torso, all throughout the head. Comfortable breath energy coming in, comfortable breath energy going out. This soothes the nerves of the body and has a soothing effect on the mind. It’s just as the body needs to rest in order to recover from its wounds, the mind needs to rest as well, to have a sense of nourishment with the breath. Nourishment from its mindfulness and full body awareness. And allowing it to stay there. Tell yourself, “There’s nothing else you have to do right now, nowhere else you have to go. Just stay right here.” Allow the mind and the body to be healed. Because the breath, as medicine, is medicine. It’s like a salve you put on a wound or cream that you put on an itch. It’s not the case that you just put it on and then wipe it off. Once you put it on, you’ve got to let it stay there for as long as possible so it can have its gradual healing effect. The same with the mind and the breath. The same with the body and good breath energy. The longer these things can stay together, the greater the healing effect. The good thing about this medicine is that it’s free. And you can take it with you wherever you go. It’s not a thing, it’s a skill. It’s a healing skill. So whatever comes up in the mind, you have a way of healing the wounds in the mind. The breath energy actually has a lot of impact on the way different illnesses go in the body. Any illnesses that come from stress or tension will gradually disappear. As for other illnesses, even though working with the breath may not be able to make them go away, at least you find yourself suffering a lot less from the illness, suffering a lot less from the pain, because you learn how to manage the pain from within. So whether there’s a sense of blockage around a particular pain, we can breathe through it so the pain is less oppressive. And you can also find other parts of the body, other parts of your energy body, that are not in pain. You can focus there, so you don’t have to have that feeling of being surrounded and oppressed by the pain. So each time you breathe in, think, “Oh, that’s a healing breath.” Each time you breathe out, think, “It’s a healing breath.” It’s the breath combined with your alertness and your patient mindfulness, knowing that sometimes the effect will take time. But hey, it’s better than not having these skills. And if you find that you’ve slipped off, just come right back and breathe in a healing way again. When you come back, reward yourself with an especially good breath, one that feels really, really satisfying. Just pose that question in mind. What kind of breath would feel really gratifying right now? Allow the body to breathe in that way. And of course, once it’s breathed in that way once, why stop with once? Ask yourself again, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” And how about now? Each breath coming in and going out, ask yourself, “Where would this breath feel best?” Because the breath is always a whole-body process. When you breathe in, the entire nervous system is involved. Parts of it more blatantly than others, but the whole nervous system is involved. So if you have a feeling that the whole body is breathing in coordination, it’s breathing in in harmony, breathing out in harmony, that harmony has a lot to do with the healing effect here. And if the mind stays here, it’s not jumping around all over the place. It has a healing effect on the body, and then it gets healed by this process, too. So think of this as a medical treatment that you can take with you wherever you go. It’s always available, because the breath is always here. As long as you’re alive, here’s the breath, right here. The only other ingredients you need are the mindfulness and alertness, plus a quality of the Buddha called ardency. Full attention, really try to be skillful as you do this. The greater skill and sensitivity you bring to this process, the greater the healing effect. What you’re doing is taking advantage of the medicine that’s right around you, right here, to tell the story of the Buddha’s own personal doctor. He was a son of a courtesan who had actually thrown him off on a garbage heap. She didn’t want a son, so she threw him on the garbage heap. A prince happened to come along riding on his elephant, and he saw the baby on the garbage heap, so he took him home to the palace and raised him. As the boy got older, the other boys in the palace started taunting him, “We know who our mother and father are, but who are your mother and father?” So the boy went to ask the prince, and the prince said, “Well, I don’t know who your mother is, but since I raised you, I consider you my mother.” The boy realized that this was a very precarious position, to be in a palace without any real connection. So he went off to study to be a doctor. He studied for seven years. He began to wonder when the end of this course of study was going to come. So he asked his teacher, and the teacher said, “Well, take a basket and a pair of shears and go around the city.” This was Taksila. It was northern Pakistan. “Go around the city for a radius of ten miles, and if you find any plants that are not medicinal, bring them back.” So the boy went around the city, around the radius of ten miles, and came back and said, “There are no plants out there that are not medicinal. Everything has a medicinal use.” His teacher said, “Okay, you’ve completed your training.” So the principle here is that there’s medicine everywhere if you know where to look for it. And fortunately, the most important medicine is right here, as close as possible. Your breath, your mindfulness, your alertness, your awareness here in the present moment. When you bring these things together, and keep them together in a way where they fit together and they feel good together, that’s medicine for the body, medicine for the mind. So try to take advantage of the fact that the medicine is always here. It’s just a question of whether you’re going to use it or not.

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