Befriending the Breath

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To stay focused on the breath, you have to regard it as your friend. And look at the meditation as a way of developing a friendship. It’s going to take some time. And you have to be observant to see what your friend likes. To show your friend that you can be trustworthy. Because sometimes the body reacts negatively to all the attention you’re paying to it. In the past you’ve ignored it, you’ve treated it harshly, and so it may not trust you. So you have to show that you’re trustworthy this time. You’re going to be patient. You’re going to watch the breath to see what kind of breathing feels good. You’re not going to come in with a lot of preconceived notions about how the meditation should go. Just look after the causes. You’re mindful. You keep the breath in mind all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. And you’re alert. Pay attention to what’s happening. How does the breath feel good? How does the breath not feel good? What parts of the breath are you not acquainted with? Start out with the areas where you are acquainted, where it’s easy to notice a sensation of breathing coming in and going out, the area where you’re familiar with the breath. But always keep in mind that you may have a strange way of thinking about the breath. So be alert to the fact that maybe the way you’re breathing is not as comfortable as it could be. Try different ways of conceiving of the breath. This is where Ajaan Lee’s method is useful. Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the energy flowing in the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel energy moving in your body? When you breathe out, how does it feel? Do you put pressure on it as you breathe in? Do you squeeze it when you breathe out? Try to relax your shoulders, relax your arms, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then notice any other places in the body where you tend to add a little tension to the in-breath or add a little tension to the out-breath. When you notice that, see if in the next breath you can breathe in and breathe out without that tension. See how the breath responds. See how the body responds. See how your mind responds. And if you find your mind wandering away, just remind yourself that those friends that you’re wandering away with, your thoughts and memories of the past, anticipations of the future, all those perceptions, you’ve been friends with them long enough. And you know what kind of friends they are. Sometimes they help you, and sometimes they don’t. They’re not reliable. You wish them well, and then you come back. This is an important principle. Sometimes you’ll see the face of somebody that has wronged you in the past, or someone you’ve wronged. Wish that person well. Say, “I’m here to make my mind a better mind so I’m not disturbed by what other people do. And if there’s anything unskillful I’ve done in the past, I’m going to learn how not to do it again.” How are you going to do that? By developing good qualities in the mind, like the alertness and the mindfulness and the sensitivity you develop as you meditate. So you’re here to work on a new friendship. Or, if you’ve been meditating for a long time, you want to develop this friendship to see how far it can go. As the Buddha describes the steps of breath meditation that can take you all the way to nirvana, it can get that profound. So it’s not the case that you focus on the breath and then you forget about it. You use the breath as an anchor. Even when you’re focusing on the mind, the way to focus on the mind is first to get it anchored with the breath and keep it in touch with the breath so that you know you’re staying in the present moment. That’s where you want to observe the mind. Because if the mind slips off into the past or into the future, you’re not observing the mind. You’re just flowing along with these currents that come through and take you away. It’s like watching a movie. You have the choice. Either you can get totally involved in what seems to be happening up on the screen. There are people up there. There are locations up there. All kinds of dramas are happening up there. Blood is being shed. People are falling in love. Whatever. That’s what it seems like when you get into the movie. But if you step off to the side of the movie theater and then look across the room, you see something else happening. You see this beam of light from the projector flashing on the screen. The colors are flashing. Red, yellow, white, green, blue. People are reacting to these flashing colors. You can see that the screen is very thin and there’s nothing really happening up there. It’s just colors, lights. Yet people are laughing. People are crying. People are getting excited. People are getting scared. Whatever. And that’s when you really understand what’s going on. It’s the same with the mind. If you let yourself get carried off into the thoughts of the past and the thoughts of the future, it’s like getting into the movie and actually thinking there’s something happening up there and then reacting to what seems to be happening up there. But if you can stay anchored in the present moment, then you can watch the lights flashing but you don’t get sucked in. The process is happening, but you don’t have to identify with it. This is important. This is how you come to understand how the mind creates its reality. Many times it’s an illusory reality that causes itself unnecessary suffering, even when it thinks it’s having a good time. So you’ve got to learn to be a little bit dubious about some of these other friends you’ve been hanging out with, the old movies that come running up in your head. If you find yourself getting sucked into the movie, remind yourself, “Okay, there’s a movie theater in here. Let’s just look at it as a movie theater and not as an actual story.” Then you can start seeing how the present moment is happening. The mind gets sucked in. What are the stages? When what starts out just as a little perception in the mind, a little image in the mind, becomes a whole world that you can get involved in. Where do you surrender to the world? Where do you have the choice not to surrender? One of the easiest ways of seeing this is learning how to catch your thoughts quickly. One of the strange things about meditation is that people wander off and then are surprised to find that they’ve wandered off. They get back to the breath and say, “I’m going to really stay with the breath this time. I’m not going to wander off.” Five minutes later, they’re off again. And they’re surprised again. So it’s important to learn how not to be surprised. In other words, expect that there will be other thoughts coming into the mind. But you’re going to be prepared for them. Notice when the mind begins to edge away from the breath. It’s there with the breath, but it’s looking around for someplace else to go. It’s like a bug has come to the edge of a leaf and its feelers go out and sort of feel around to see where there’s something else to jump to. If the breeze blows and another leaf comes by, the bug goes on. It’s that moment of coming to the edge and feeling around. That’s what you want to catch in the mind. As soon as you sense that happening, you’ve got to redouble your efforts. Ask yourself, “What would be a really good breath right now?” Because part of this friendship you’re developing with the breath is learning that the needs for the body are going to change. You don’t want it to become mechanical. If it starts becoming mechanical and automatic, pretty soon the whole thing goes on automatic pilot and your attention is wandering off someplace else. So you want to remind yourself that you’re learning something important here. Even before you start learning about the mind, you’re going to learn a lot of things about the body. This sense of form we have here. As we mentioned earlier, the sense of pleasure that comes from the breath is not a sensual pleasure. It’s a pleasure of form, the feeling of the body as it’s felt from within. You want to explore that as much as you can, because that has a huge impact on your health. The way the energy flows in the body will determine which parts of the body get well nourished with blood and which parts don’t. So if you can get the breath energy flowing smoothly and easily throughout the whole body, you’re helping to nourish everybody. At the same time, when the whole body feels more and more relaxed with the breath, more and more nourished and soothed by the breath, it’s easier for the mind to settle in and be happy to stay here. So you want to be very sensitive each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Pay attention to this new friend you’re trying to develop here. You’re still learning about the friend. And as with all friends, it’ll respond if you pay attention to it, what it needs. Be sensitive to its needs. And as it responds, you find that you feel a lot more at home here in the breath, at home here in the body as well. As for those other old friends, you wish them well. Like that chant we had this evening, wishing well the snakes, beings with no feet, beings with two feet, beings with four feet, beings with many feet, may they all be happy. And then, as you notice at the very end, it says, may they all go away. The chant comes from a time when some monks were going into the forests. One particular monk was bitten by a snake and died. The monks came to report this to the Buddha, and the Buddha said, “Well, it’s obvious that that monk had not spread thoughts of goodwill to all the different royal families of snakes.” So he taught the monks this blessing, wishing well to all these beings, remembering that even snakes have a heart. They suffer, too. They want happiness, too. But at the same time, we really have nothing to offer the snakes. The snakes have nothing to offer to us aside from goodwill. So we wish them goodwill. May they not come to any harm, and may they not get entangled with us. As human beings, the snakes don’t usually have very good interactions. So you wish them well. Leave them alone. Hope that they leave you alone. One of the reasons we chanted it tonight is because I noticed a little rattler this morning up here on the pad. With a warm weather like this, the snakes are going to come out. So keep an eye out. But wish them well. You go your way, they go theirs. And it’s the same with these wandering thoughts that come into the mind. You wish them well, but you go your way, they go theirs. For at the moment, they have nothing to offer you, and you have nothing to offer them. You’re working on a friendship that’s going to be a lot more rewarding. So keep focusing your efforts here. The breath coming in, the breath going out, and the way the breath is coming in. The breath energy feels throughout the body. Allow it all to become coordinated. If you find that the energy in one part of the body seems to be working at cross-purposes with the energy in another part, step back a bit. Just pose the question in your mind, “How could those different parts of the body work together?” If there’s a lot of pressure in your head, don’t focus your attention up here. Focus your attention down into the body. Leave the head alone for the time being. And remind yourself that there’s a lot of room for play here. After all, this is a friend. Like when you were a child, the whole point of having a friend was that you got to play with a friend. So as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you can begin to play with it. One way of counteracting a lot of pressure in your head is thinking that when you breathe in, the energy in the body flows down, down, down. Think of it like butter melting on your shoulders and melting down your arms and out your hands, down your back, down your legs. In other words, you can use your imagination to help the process along. So as with any friendship, it takes time. It takes a lot of your powers of observation. But it’s a friendship that can take you far. Keep that thought in mind when your old friends come around to bother you. Tell them, “You’ve got work to do here. You’re learning something very new, something very important.” You wish them well, and then you get back to work. But the work here is good work. As I said, it involves a fair amount of play. So try to be very clear about who your true friends are and who your false friends are—not only outside, but especially inside. And work on the friendship that shows the most promise.

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