Developed in Body & Mind

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Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Get a sense of where you feel the breath in the body, the breathing in the body. The breathing is actually more than just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s an energy that flows through the nervous system each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Then you want to be anchored in that as much as you can. This provides the grounding that gives the mind the foundation it needs to work with itself. As the Buddha pointed out, the causes of stress and suffering come from within the mind. So the question sometimes is, “Why don’t we just look straight at the mind? Why do we bother with the breath?” We need a foundation, because the mind, when it’s turning on itself, can start turning on itself, doing all kinds of weird things to itself. When the mind is dealing with issues purely in the mind, if it doesn’t have a good foundation, it can go off in all kinds of extremes. You’ve probably had the experience that a certain thought takes control of your mind, and it seems perfectly rational, and it seems like the sort of thing you’ve really got to think about, and it’s driving you crazy. Then when you talk it over with somebody else, once you get it outside of the mind, you begin to realize how ridiculous it was, and it’s easier to let go. So one of the checks you need in the practice is that ability to step outside your normal trains of thought, so you can get some perspective. And the breath is a good place to do that. It gives you a grounding. It gives you a reference point here in the present moment. And you can take it as a game. When the breath feels good, things feel balanced, stable, and solid inside. It’s a sign that things are going well with the mind as well. When things get distorted in the breath, there’s probably some distortion in the mind. So you need this as a way of measuring something today. You need to compare the situation of the mind with the situation of the body. And the body and the mind help each other along. The Buddha talks about training in the practice as developing the mind and developing the body, but not developing in the way we normally think of here in the West. Developing the body, he says, is actually developing the mind in a way that when you stay with the body, feelings of pleasure don’t overcome the mind. You refer both to feelings of pleasure in the body and feelings of pleasure in the mind. You want to stay in touch with the body so that the feelings don’t overcome you. You have the ability to maintain the body as your frame of reference, regardless of how strong the feelings of pleasure may be. Developing the mind means that you’re resilient to feelings of pain. In other words, pain arises so that the mind doesn’t get worked up. You’re able to watch the pain. And this, of course, requires some ability to stay grounded. We’re talking both about physical pain and mental pain. To deal both with pleasure and pain and not get overcome by them requires that you have a really good, solid foundation. And that’s what we’re trying to provide with the breath. You’ve got the body and the mind together here with the breath, as long as the breath energy feels good. It’s a sign that they’re getting along together. One side is not oppressing the other or exerting too much influence on the other. Things are balanced. After all, we are following the middle path here. And to maintain this balance requires that you look after both the body and the mind, because both of them tell you interesting things about the other. They allow you to look at pleasure and pain. When everything is balanced inside, you can look at the pleasure that comes up and not get carried away by it. Because for the most part, when pleasure comes, we want to jump right in. When pain comes, we try to push it away. And in either case, to really know it. When the Buddha’s talking about a middle path, it’s not that you try to find some place between pleasure and pain or on that continuum that’s okay but not too pleasant or not too painful. That’s not what he means. He means that you’re not taking pleasure as something you run to or pain that you run away from. You want to be in the middle of the two so you can watch them and understand them and put them to use. In other words, you want to be able to use the pleasure so that you get the mind to settle down. The pleasure that comes from getting the mind centered, getting a sense of balance in the body, a sense of balance in the mind, that’s a pleasure you want to use. And as for using pain, as the Buddha said, if you really want to overcome pain, you can’t overcome it by running away from it. As with anything you don’t like, the more you run away from it, the more it chases after you. Or if you have a problem in the household, just running out of the house is not going to solve the problem. You’ve got to stay right here and deal with it. That’s what the pleasure of concentration is for. So you can stay right here, centered in the body, centered in the mind, and look at pain so you can comprehend it. That’s how you get past the pain, how you get past the stress and suffering. It’s by putting the mind in a position where it can look at the pain and not get knocked off balance. So you can see how it arises, how it passes away, and you begin to see all the different perceptions and thought constructs we build around the pain, all the little narratives, the complaint that says, “Why me? Why me? Why me? Why me?” But the answer, of course, is, “Well, why not you? Everybody has pain. This is part of the contract that we didn’t look at the fine print when we signed on to being born. There’s aging, illness, and death. They’re going to come. And if you try to run away from them, they just keep chasing you. So you’ve got to turn around and face them.” It’s a lot scarier when they’re chasing you than it is when you really turn around and face them down. You begin to take the pain apart. Pain can seem like a huge mountain, but when you begin to take it apart, you see it’s just little bits and pieces here and there. And you’ve glommed them all together and weighed yourself down with them, which you don’t have to do. One thing that happens when there’s pain, whether physical or mental, is just the sense of, “How much longer is this going to last? I don’t know if I can stand it.” If you’re concerned about how long it’s going to last or how long it has lasted, you’re just weighing down the present moment with more than it can really bear. But if you learn to look at the pain each moment, each moment, each moment, just this particular aspect of the pain, you realize that while you’re watching it, it’s passing away. Now, it may be replaced with another moment of pain or another moment of pain, but you’re actually watching it pass away, pass away, pass away. It’s not like it’s coming at you or attacking you. It’s like you’re sitting in a railroad car, facing backwards, and as you watch things come past, they’re going away from you, going away from you, so that you’re not in the line of fire. Or you can ask yourself, “Where is the pain strongest right now?” And you find that it moves. So you trace it around and you begin to realize it’s not there. It’s not quite as solid as you thought it was. So you can actually start taking things apart because you’ve developed this really good foundation where you don’t feel threatened. You don’t feel the need to run away. This applies both to physical pain and to mental pain. You want a place where you can sit and look at these things. This is why the breath is useful. Because when there’s pain in the mind, you look around and it seems to be everywhere in the mind there’s pain. You say, “Well, go to the breath.” You can actually make the breath comfortable, regardless of what the state of mind may be. And that puts you in a much better mood. You realize that not everything is consumed by that particular mental pain. You get a greater sense of self-confidence. This is where genuine self-confidence comes from. It comes from developing skills. There’s that move in education to teach kids self-confidence, but just telling them to be confident or to have self-esteem doesn’t really cure the problem. Self-esteem comes from realizing that you’ve mastered some skills. You feel confident that you can handle different difficulties, you can handle different situations. Sometimes this requires that you develop skills in areas where you’re not especially talented. This is another area where the educational system here sometimes fails us because it tends to channel us into areas where we’re already good. It very rarely teaches us the skills we need to compensate for our weaknesses. We’re taught to focus on our strengths, focus on our strengths, and our weaknesses get left behind. An important part of the balance of the practice is that you learn how to work on your weak side. If you’re good at concentration but not so good at analysis, you’ve got to work on the analysis. As the John Fuehn used to say, “People fall into two types, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough.” The ones who think too much have to really focus on concentration. The ones who don’t think enough have to focus on learning how to analyze. So you can bring things into balance. If you’re very much in your head, in your mind, you have to learn how to stress staying in touch with the body, and vice versa. You have to learn how to bring things into balance so your foundation can stay in any even keel and not start tipping over. So in the Buddhist sense, we’re working on developing both the body and the mind. The mind needs the breath as an anchor, and the body needs a well-trained mind so it doesn’t go around doing crazy things. You have to learn how to bring peace into the two of them. That’s a lot of what the breath meditation is about. It’s learning how to get the mind and the body to stay together and on good terms, so that each is healing from the other. The mind has a good, solid place to stay. It can settle down and not be constantly driven around by mange, the desire to go here and then there and then here. It can push here and push there to get away from the itch and the mange. And the body needs the mind to look after it. It’s like a person living in a house. If there’s nobody living in the house, then the ants take over, and then the mice take over, and who knows what else moves in. The dry rot begins to hit the wood. Nobody’s looking after it. Meanwhile, the person who owns the house is out, exposed to the sun and the wind and the rain, or floats around for a while. But then, whatever you’re floating around in, it’s like being in an airplane. You get up in the airplane and you discover you don’t have a landing strip. You’re going to come crashing down. So the safest place is to be in the house. You benefit. You’ve got the shelter of the house. The roof, the walls, the windows and doors, you can open and close when it’s appropriate. And the house has somebody looking after it. You can fix the broken faucets. You can fix the broken pipes. You can get all the pests out of the house. Both sides benefit. So it’s important that you learn how to teach them how to be on your own. In good terms. And as you develop this skill, you begin to realize that you can deal with issues in the mind, you can deal with issues in the body, and you can deal with other issues as well. Because these are actually the hardest issues to deal with in your life. So it’s good to make peace inside. So things can be brought into balance. you

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