A Gift of Well-being

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When you meditate, you have to think about what you’re doing. As for other thoughts, you can put them aside. Think about the breath and ask yourself what kind of breathing is going to be most comfortable. And see what kind of results you get. Does long breathing feel good now? And John Lee recommends starting out with long breathing as a way of energizing the body a little bit, energizing the mind, and then letting the breath find its own rhythm. But it often helps to nudge it a little bit instead of just breathing the way you normally do, day after day. Try experimenting with the breath. Long in, short out. Short in, long out. Heavier or lighter than normal. Faster or slower. Deeper or more shallow. See what kind of breathing gives rise to a sense of ease, well-being, refreshment in the body. Notice which parts of the body seem to be most sensitive. Often they’ll be around the neck or in the heart area, but they could be anywhere. Once you’ve found a way of breathing that feels good in one of your more central areas, you may want to explore the rest of the body and make a systematic surveying going through all the different parts. Notice how they feel when you breathe. Which side of the body seems to be holding more tension? For example, if you’re focusing on the back, notice if the upper back is at the left side or the right side that’s holding more tension. Then go down to the lower back. How about there? Down through your legs. Because you’ll find that the tension tends to be distributed, and it’s very unusual ways. Sometimes the right shoulder may be holding more tension, but your left hip is holding more tension than the right hip. Get to know the way the body feels right now and how it plays a role in the breathing, how every part of the body plays a role in the breathing. This helps to relax a little bit. It’s not a lot of the tension that you tend to hold throughout the day, but it’s more than just a relaxation technique. If you really want to get the most benefits out of it, you try to keep the body as relaxed as possible, or keep the tension as relaxed as possible, as you go throughout the day. This way you begin to notice when certain types of thoughts or emotions arise up inside you. What do they do to the breath energy? And how can you use the breath energy to undercut the unskillful emotions and the unskillful thoughts? This way you’re not wounding yourself as you go through the day. And you’re going to be less likely to wound others. Because if you have a sense of well-being right here, the part of the mind that feels dissatisfied and is down on you, and then wants to spread a little of that around to other people too, as long as you’re feeling miserable, let’s not let other people feel miserable too. That kind of mind state gets undercut when you’re feeling refreshed and full all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. And you can maintain that sense of fullness, refreshment, well-being as you go through the day. Why on earth would you want to cause trouble? Either to yourself or to other people. This is why this practice is not a selfish or self-centered practice. It’s based on the understanding that your actions have an impact, both on yourself and on other people. And where do your actions come from? They come from the state of the mind right now. And if you learn how to tend to that state, your actions are likely to be a lot better and a lot more skillful, a lot more appropriate for the situation. So it’s in this way that the meditation is a gift to yourself and to other people, just as the practice as a whole is a gift. This is clearest in generosity. You have something, you see someone else needs it, and you realize you can do without it, you’re happy to give it away. This applies not only to material things, but also to your knowledge, to your time, your sense of fairness, your forgiveness. When you learn to develop generosity in these ways, both sides benefit. The people who are recipients of your generosity benefit, and you benefit. It helps you realize that there are forms of happiness in this world that are not zero-sum games, i.e., you gain, somebody else loses, or they gain and you lose. This is something where both sides gain. The same with virtue. You abstain from unskillful behavior. As the Buddha said, this is a gift. If you can make the promise to yourself and keep it that you’re not going to harm anybody in any situation, regardless—no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants—then you can hold to that promise. You don’t keep making excuses for yourself, saying, “Well, this animal is inconvenient. Let’s just get it out of the way.” Or, “Here’s a little white lie. It doesn’t really matter if I lie here.” You’ve got to make sure you don’t give in to those ideas. You’re giving safety to everybody. People can trust your words. They can trust your behavior. And as you give safety to everybody, you have a share in that universal safety as well. So that’s a kind of happiness, where instead of drawing a boundary between yourself and other people, you’re actually erasing the boundary. And the same principle applies to meditation, as you can develop a better sense of well-being inside. You look at the different voices in your mind and say, “Do this, do that.” You look at what they’re saying and you realize, “Okay, if you did those things, you’d be harming yourself, harming other people.” Then you realize that a lot of their power comes from a sense of irritation inside. Well, you can learn how to soothe out that irritation. Breathe right through it. Think of the breath as a salve or a cream that you put on the mind. Then those voices lose their power. Your actions are less oppressive to others because you’re not wounding yourself or weighing yourself down. Inside, you find that you have more strength to be generous, wise, and helpful to other people. So this path we practice here is not a selfish path. It’s based on the desire to find true happiness. And true happiness is something you can’t control. It can’t harm anybody else. If it did harm somebody else, it wouldn’t be true happiness. So you’re really looking very carefully for how you’re going to try to give rise to happiness in your life. These practices of generosity, virtue, and meditation are among the few types of happiness that really are harmless all around. So as you breathe in a way that feels soothing, if you need a little soothing, energizing if you need energy, relaxing if you need some tension unwound or disentangled, you’re not the only one who benefits. You’re learning how to fabricate your experience of the present moment in a skillful way. This inner fabrication then becomes a foundation for the way you act in the world outside as well. And so it’s a benefit that spreads from right here and goes out in all directions. That’s why it’s important that you maintain your center right here as much as you can. Not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you get up, go home, wherever you go, when you’re dealing with other people, talking with them, listening to them. As you go through the day, remember, your gift to them is creating a good sense of energy inside yourself. You’re protecting yourself both from negative energies outside, if you can keep your sense of healthy, breath energy filling the body, and your awareness filling the body. That’s your protection. And you’re radiating good energy out into the world around you. This practice gives benefits all around.

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