Breath Medicine

September 2, 2011

Breathe in, breathe out. The body’s doing this all the time. It’s a very simple process. It’s what keeps the body alive. Yet we can get a lot more out of it if we pay it close attention. It’s good for the body, it’s good for the mind, for us to stay with the breathing for a while. Notice how it feels. When you think of the word breath, don’t think just of the air coming in and out of the lungs. Think also of the energy flow in the body, the energy that flows through the blood vessels, the energy that flows through the nerves, that allows you to sense the body, to sense where your hands are, where your feet are, where all the different parts of your body are right now. It’s a very subtle flow of energy, but it’s there. That, too, is breath. And to get most of the breathing process, you want to be aware of the breath energy that flows through the body as well. Try to notice what kind of breathing feels best. When you’re feeling tired, you want to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. When you’re feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. In other words, use the breath as medicine for the body. It can also be medicine for the mind. The mind needs some soothing. It tends to be frazzled, it tends to be overworked. Part of the blame lies outside, but a lot of it lies within. It’s within the mind itself. It’s constantly creating this thought world and that thought world, and it goes here and goes there. If you were asking yourself what percentage of that activity is actually useful, and if you were truthful in the answer, you’d have to say it’s a pretty small percentage. A lot of it is just frenzied activity that wears you down. So the mind needs a place to stay, a place to settle in, where it can rest, where it can recover. And the breath can provide that as well. Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. And notice how long, deep breathing feels in the body. If it feels good, keep it up. If you reach a point where it’s not so good, you can change. Make the in-breath shorter or the out-breath shorter, or both the in-breath and the out-breath shorter. You can make them deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Notice where you most clearly sense the breath in the body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. And watch over that spot. Let it tell you when the breath is too long or too short or too heavy or too light or too deep or whatever. The more sensitive you are to that spot, the more you’ll be able to adjust the breath so it feels just right. And it feels just right all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Try not to squeeze things out at the end of the out-breath. Or pull things in too much when you breathe in. Allow the body to breathe freely. You’re just here to monitor and make slight changes. And the change can simply be through the power of thought. Just say, “Shorter,” and see how the body responds. “Longer,” see how the body responds. Do you find something you really like? Then think of the breath energy permeating the whole body. So it’s not just air being drawn in through the nose, but it’s energy coming in and out of the body from all directions. And you’re sitting here in the middle of it. It washes in, it washes out. Working through any patterns of stress or tension, or tiredness there may be in the body, try to breathe in a way that’s refreshing, that feels deep down good. Because it’s only when the breath feels really comfortable like this that it’s going to get absorbing. And we are trying to develop a state of absorption in the mind really intensely focused on this. It’s not like we’re trying to clamp the mind down onto the breath. If you make it really comfortable, and really refreshing, the mind will just naturally want to stay. As for any thoughts that come through, just let them go passing through. You don’t have to catch them. You don’t have to examine them. You don’t have to chase them away. They’ll go away on their own if you don’t pay them any mind. Just like the sounds, the sounds of the crickets, the faraway sounds of the sirens, whatever. They can stay in their own place. You don’t have to get involved with them. You’re not responsible for what they do. The sounds come in, the sounds go right through you. You’re here trying to provide medicine for the body and medicine for the mind by the way you breathe. When the breath feels refreshing, it really is good for the body. There are a lot of diseases that are caused by the tension in the way we hold the body, or the stress that we place unnecessarily on different organs of the body. And when you breathe in a way that feels good, all the way through the body, that helps to relieve those sources of disease. As for the mind, its greed, its aversion, its delusion tend to come from a sense of hunger, a sense of dissatisfaction. So try to breathe in a way that’s satisfying. The mind will feel so frazzled, it’ll be more willing to let go. It’ll settle down and it gains strength as it settles in. It’s refreshed by the breath. And the medicine provided by the breath is one that takes time to have an effect. It’s not like an injection. They stick a needle in your blood vessel and give you some medicine and you can expect instant reaction in the body. The medicine provided by the breath is not like that. It takes longer to have its effect. It’s like a cream you put on a rash. You put the cream on the rash and you let it stay there. You reapply it again and again and again. And the fact that the cream is there, constantly working on the rash, that’s what heals the rash. And that’s the same with the sense of concentration, the sense of settling in that can come with a breath. It takes time. Each time you breathe in, it feels comfortable, it feels refreshing. It’s one more application of medicine to the mind, one more application of medicine to the body. So you’ve got an hour here to apply the medicine and allow it to heal. Allow the medicine to do its work. And if the mind asks, “Well, what’s next?” You say, “This is what’s next.” We talk about the mind being on a path. Well, the path is being right here. And allow this sense of concentration to develop. Mindfulness is what keeps reminding you to stay here. Your alertness watches what’s going on. If you notice the mind beginning to slip off, bring it back. If you notice that it’s already slipped off, bring it back. Be aware of the fact that it’ll probably slip off again. So be prepared. As soon as you sense that it’s beginning to lose interest or beginning to have some gaps in its awareness, remind yourself that the breath is where you want to stay. And then try to breathe in a way that’s especially satisfying to remind you of why you’re here. Now, you may find that a certain rhythm of breathing that feels satisfying will feel good for a while, and then it doesn’t feel so good anymore, which means you have to be on top of this all the time. Notice when the mind is not feeling so refreshed or the body’s not feeling so refreshed as a sign you’ve got to change the breath again. So ask yourself, does it need a shorter breathing now, more shallow, more gentle, more stronger? You’ve got to keep tabs on this. This is how you develop your alertness. It’s not just a matter of soothing the mind and soothing the body, because that would just put you to sleep. You’ve got to be alert as well. And this combination of stillness and alertness is what’s going to make real changes. Because when the mind is soothed and the body is soothed, that’s not the end of the matter. You’re basically putting yourself in shape where you can do the real work that needs to be done on the mind to figure out why the mind is causing itself suffering. When it creates a thought world, what is it doing? When it tells itself, “I’ll never really be happy in this life,” why is it saying that? Why do you have to believe that? The Buddha says it is possible to find true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t change. If you have doubts about that, learn how to question the doubts. In other words, you want to be able to watch what the mind is doing, what the mind is saying, and catch it when it’s doing and saying things that are actually detrimental to itself. That’s the only way you’re going to learn how to change its habits. So for the time being, try to put the mind in good shape. Apply the medicine of the breath. Try to be alert to make sure that the medicine is working. And you’ll find that you develop really important qualities in the mind. This is the most important thing you can be doing with your mind. It’s training it. Training it to look after itself. Some people say that meditation is selfish, but that’s because they don’t understand that. When you meditate, you learn how to be more self-reliant. You place fewer burdens on other people. And some people learn how to depend on themselves, who can rely on themselves. Those are the ones who have the most to offer the world. So you’re not the only one benefiting here. So be confident that this is something that’s really worth doing. And worth doing well.

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