At Home with the Breath

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Watching your breath in the present moment. You’re watching something nobody else can watch. They can watch their breath, but they can’t watch yours. How it feels right now as you breathe in and breathe out, that’s something only you can sense. The question is, how does it feel? Does it feel good or not? The next question is, how do you know? This requires that you observe, that you watch for a while. Try a certain kind of breathing. You might try long breathing for a while and see how that feels. If it feels good, stick with it. If it feels good enough, stick with it. And then notice what happens over time as you stick with it. Does it stay feeling good, or does it not feel so good anymore? Try to notice where the breath is most obvious, where the sensation of the breathing is most obvious, which can be anywhere in the body. It’s not necessarily where the air passes into the nose. It could be the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest. Or just a more general feeling of energy washing through the body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. It takes a while to get acquainted. So you get a better and better sense of what really does feel good for the body and what has a good influence on the body. It gives rise to a sense of ease. It gives rise to a sense of fullness. It makes the place here in the body a place you want to settle in. The mind can gather together all its various pieces that have been scattered around here and there. All come together here. That’s what you’re looking for. So if the breath doesn’t feel like something you could gather around, then work with it a little bit more. This is where you learn how to use your own powers of observation and develop your own powers of judgment. This is something so very intimate and so very much yours that we tend to overlook it. The body will breathe on its own if we don’t pay any attention to it, and so we tend to leave it to its own devices and we go off looking someplace else. But if you want to get the most out of the breath, you really have to give it your full attention. In Pali the word is citta. It means mind, but it also means the intentness of your focus, the intentness of your awareness. It’s when you really pay attention to things like this that you begin to sense what their potentials are. Otherwise it’s just in, out, in, out. I was in a John in Thailand who one time criticized John Lee for teaching people breath meditation. He said, “What’s there to see in breath? It’s just in, out, in, out. That’s all there is.” And as John Lee said, “Well, if that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.” Meaning, of course, that there’s a lot more if you look for it. The breath has lots of different ins and outs. And only if you pay a lot of attention will you begin to notice how the different levels of breath energy are related to the in-and-out breath, and how you can use the different levels of energy to create a sense of well-being, a sense of feeling at home here in the present moment. So it’s easier and easier for the mind to settle in and feel like it belongs here. It’s not in foreign territory. When you develop this sense of feeling at home with the breath, then wherever you go, you’ve got your home. And all the good things that go together with a home. You’ve got your store of food, a sense of well-being that comes from settling in like this. You’ve got medicine, soothing parts of the body that are tired, that feel worn out, that feel irritated. And medicine for the mind as well. The mind can soothe some of its senses of irritation or being frazzled by all the stresses and strains of life. You’ve got a place of protection. This is your territory. Don’t let other people invade it. It’s so easy when you’re talking to other people to let their energy invade yours. And sometimes we even think that it’s an act of compassion. You take in their feelings and suddenly find yourself carrying around who knows what. So you fully inhabit the sense of the body here. Make this your space. And then the energy that comes from inhabiting the body, that becomes your protection, just as your house has a roof and walls to protect against the wind and the rain. The sense of the breath energy filling the body, the sense of your awareness filling the body, provides you with a sense of protection. Then you’ve got the windows and doors that you can open and close. In other words, when there are times that you have to think, you can think. But try to do it in the context of this sense of present awareness, realizing that you have the choice. And you can ask yourself those questions that the Buddha asks about speech. They apply to thought as well. One, is it true? Two, is it useful? Three, is this the right time and place? And if you get a yes, yes, yes to all those questions, then go ahead and think. And if you realize that you can’t think through the issue, then you come back to the breath. Try to get some more nourishment from the breath. If you do think through the issue and you’re done with it, then come back to the breath as well. Make this your default position. So you’ve got food, clothing, shelter, medicine, everything all together right here. But it requires that you pay a lot of attention to what’s going on right here to make the most of it. And then you find that your house also has a laboratory. You begin to see the workings of the mind a lot more clearly, because in the course of settling down you are engaging in these different mental functions, the thinking and evaluating, holding a perception in mind. These all come under aggregates, and you learn how to separate them out because they’re essential parts of creating a good state of concentration inside. They’re your building blocks and your skills for getting the mind to settle down. And when you’re able to isolate these functions, you can begin to notice how much you cling to them, not just in concentration but as you go through the day. You see how the mind uses these functions to create mental worlds for itself that it occupies. And you can ask yourself, “To what extent is it necessary? To what extent are you actually causing yourself a lot of needless suffering?” And this way it’s not just a question of settling in. You learn a lot about the mind as you settle in. The other day someone was asking about when you get past the processes of concentration so you get into real insight work. And the answer, of course, is that the processes themselves are the things you want to learn about, the things that you’re going to gain insight about. The process of getting the mind to settle down, the process of getting it to stay here. What are you going to be seeing, aside from processes of the mind? The ones that you cling to, the ones that you use to create suffering, but you don’t have to use to create suffering. You can use them for other purposes, like creating a path. Then you get a sense of how much you actually can control them. And the point at which you can’t. But you’re not going to know that point until you push against it. So that’s what we’re doing as we practice concentration. You’re pushing against inconstancy, you’re pushing against stress, you’re pushing against not-self to find a state of mind that’s as constant as you can get it, as pleasurable as you can get it, as much under your control as you can manage. And see what you learn about the mind as you do that. And then see where the limitations of this are as well. That way, you’re following the example of the Buddha. It wasn’t that he simply listened to somebody’s instructions and followed the instructions A to Z and was done. He kept having to ask questions about what he was doing, noticing where he was causing unnecessary stress, and asking himself, “Is there an alternative way of acting?” He used his ingenuity to find it. And the question just kept getting more and more refined. His standards for what he was willing to accept got higher and higher. So that’s some of the work you can do in the laboratory you have in your house. And when you get tired of doing the work, you can go back simply to resting. So everything you need is right here. Just learn how to pay attention to what you’ve got and see what you can do with it. This is how the mind learns about anything. You try to be active, you play with it. That way you can see how far it goes. Otherwise, you have no idea. You read the books, you hear what people say. But how far the mind can actually go, even simply for, as the Buddha said, the range of someone who’s got the mind in jhana. That’s something you can’t think about. It’s inconceivable. There are lots of potentials here in the mind that can get developed through getting the mind in a good, strong concentration. The only way you’re going to know them is to sit down and do the work. And put aside your preconceived notions about what the mind is capable of doing. And you’ll find out that it can take you far.

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