Refuge in the Breath

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Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how it feels. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Shorted breathing, more shallow breathing, or long in-and-out short, short in-and-out long. Heavy or light, fast or slow. See what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. The needs of the body are going to change, so you have to keep on top of this. Long breathing may feel good for a while, but after a while, not so good. So you adjust it a bit. Find something that works, and then after a while, that’s not going to work anymore, so you adjust it some more. You have to be alert. There are three qualities the Buddha recommends that you bring to meditation. One of them is alertness, just watching what you’re actually doing. The other is being mindful. In other words, keeping something in mind. In this case, it means keeping the breath in mind. Keep reminding yourself that you’re going to come back to the breath. Come back to the breath if you find yourself wandering off. And if you’re with the breath, try to stay with it. This is where you want to be right now. Remind yourself you have no other responsibilities right now, nothing else you have to take on. It’s time to train the mind, and you’re going to train it with the breath. This is because of all the things in your awareness, the breath is the closest to your actual awareness. It’s your primary experience of the body. It’s what keeps you with the body. Without the breath, you’d die. So it only stands to reason that if the breath is comfortable, feels healthy, feels nourishing, it’s going to be good both for the mind and for the body. That’s one of the side benefits. The main benefit is that when the breath is comfortable, it’s very easy to stay here in the present moment. Because you want to watch what’s happening in the present moment. Some very important things are happening here. Intentions form within the mind, and you act on them. And when you act on them, that shapes the world that you experience. So the world you experience comes out of these intentions. And all too often, we’re not really paying careful attention. Everything’s on automatic pilot. And who knows when we put the settings in, and if those settings are really things that we want to stick with or whether we should change them. So we have to watch in the present moment to see where our intention is going right now. Now, to stay with the breath requires another quality besides mindfulness and alertness, and that’s ardency, that you really want to stick with us. You really want to do this well. We had that chant just now about the factors of the Eightfold Path. And ardency comes under the factor of right effort. If you see something unskillful is coming up in the mind, you try to let it go. As for the skillful qualities of the mind, you try to maintain them. What this means in practical terms is that if you notice that you’ve winded off from the breath, you come right back. You don’t beg for a few extra seconds to continue thinking about whatever it was or to tie up loose ends. You try to finish the conversation before you put the phone off. You drop the conversation right in the middle, and you come right back. And if you catch yourself wandering off again, you come right back again. You try to be as quick as possible with this. In fact, the more quickly you can notice that the mind is about to wander off, the better it is, because you’re less entangled. You drop things more easily. You want to be really sensitive to how it’s going. The word breath here doesn’t mean just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It means a whole flow of energy that brings the air in and allows it to go out, and that nourishes all the different nerves in the body. When you get really sensitive to the breath, you begin to notice that you don’t feel it. It’s just one spot in the body. The whole body is involved in the breathing process. So when there’s a comfortable sensation of breathing, you want that to spread throughout the different parts of the body. Down the back, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, all around through the head, all around through the torso. Have a sense that all the energies in the body are working together. Allow this feeling of energy to fill your awareness. It’s all around you in the body. Then try to maintain that. As we do this, we’re building a refuge or foster a refuge in the present moment. What do we need refuge from? Well, from our own unskillful habits. The dangers of the world outside are nothing compared to the dangers of what the mind can do to itself. Thoughts come in. They can pull you by the nose for years and years and years, or get you in situations that you can’t get out of for years and years. Same with your feelings. We tend to identify more with our feelings than with our thoughts, but they’re all equally dangerous because they’re really unreliable. And as you get to know them better, you begin to see how artificial they are. Even though they may seem very, very real, they’re things that we put together through our intentions, sometimes not really thinking things clearly or not realizing where our intentions are going to take us. But they create thoughts and they create feelings, and these things come back again and again and again. And because they come back so often, they seem real. And yet they can pull us in all sorts of ways that we end up suffering. This is what the Buddha’s main teaching was all about, the fact that the mind creates the suffering that really weighs the mind down. This isn’t just to say that there aren’t a lot of negative things coming in from the outside world. There can be. But the extent to which we suffer from these things basically comes from the mind’s own lack of skill. A feeling takes over, a thought takes over, and pulls us in its direction. And often we have no idea where it’s going. It seems real, it seems reliable, and we run with it. Then only later do we find out. We’ve put ourselves in danger. We’ve caused ourselves a lot of suffering. Even just the way we process sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas in the present moment, that too can make us suffer. Even when things are going well, we can make ourselves suffer, even though we want happiness. Whatever we do, we do at least with a conscious desire of trying to be happy. So why is it that we cause suffering? Well, it’s largely through our ignorance. We don’t know what we’re doing. Or we know what we’re doing, but we don’t really know what the results are going to be. We haven’t made the connection between our actions and their results. So if you want to see these things clearly, you have to put the mind in a position where it can step outside of its thoughts, outside of its feelings. And the breath is a good place to start. It gives you a sense of ease. It provides you with a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness. It gets rid of some of the hunger that keeps us running after our thoughts and feelings. If we don’t feel so hungry, then we can look at the thoughts and feelings for what they are and for where they’re going to go. We learn how to recognize a skillful intention. We learn how to recognize an unskillful intention. Seeing the difference, you realize that regardless of how much you may want to identify with these things, when you start looking at where they go and you see that some of these things are unskillful, they’re going to cause suffering, why bother? Why do you want to go with them? There’s a lot of old force of habit. But when you feed the mind in a new way, feed it on the breath in this way, so that simply settling into the present moment, there’s a sense of belonging here, that can change the power equation so the thoughts don’t seem quite so overwhelming, quite so compelling. But just as the thoughts require some fabrication, getting the breath to be comfortable is going to require some fabrication. In other words, you’re working on making the breath comfortable. And you have to see the value of that. You really do need some protection. You really do need some refuge. You need some refuge from where your thoughts or feelings might otherwise take you. That’s why, in that chant just now, it starts with right view. Realizing that the mind has a lot of power. It has the power to cause suffering, but it also has the power to put an end to suffering. And you need this ability to be able to do that. To be able to step out of your thoughts, step out of your feelings, all the unskillful intentions that might pull you into more and more suffering. And so this is where we start, by working with the breath, by exploring its possibilities. There’s a lot more to the breath than just in and out, you know. You can breathe in a way that can do away with all kinds of feelings of hunger, feelings of lack, all the various feelings that might pull you towards trying to gobble down a particular kind of thought, a particular kind of relationship, a particular kind of activity. So this is how we provide the breath. Provide refuge for the mind. This refuge requires food, otherwise you’re going to leave the refuge and go out looking for scraps. The food here is a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, energizing when you need energy, calming when you need to be calmed down. The breath can do an awful lot for the mind, if you’re willing to explore it. You take the time and try to be as observant as possible, you begin to see that the breath has lots of possibilities. So take this time to explore. That’s what meditation is. It’s exploration. It’s not like we’re trying to hear cloning somebody’s ideas. Right View is basically asking us to look at our experience and see where they’re suffering. Then we ask ourselves, “Do you want to suffer? Do you want to be free?” When you say no, okay, this is where you look to find the end of suffering. So when you want this sense of refuge, this is how you work on it, this is how you develop it, so that ultimately it can take you to a refuge that doesn’t need to be developed or worked on. It’s something that’s there. But to see that, to dig down, requires that you dig down into the mind, that you learn how to be really quiet, really observant, really mindful, alert, and ardent, to see what possibilities are here.

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