Delicious Breathing

January 24, 2012

One of the Jon Fung students had trouble getting his mind to settle down with the breath until one day he was riding a bus. The mind just settled very naturally into the breath, and he said the breath felt delicious. It was really tasty, it felt really good. And that became his standard. Breathe in a way that you can feed on. This is what we’re doing as we bring the mind to the breath. We’re going to feed on the breath. The mind has a tendency to feed on all kinds of things. The body needs to feed on physical food, the mind needs to feed on intentions, sensory contact, and on acts of consciousness itself. Those are the three kinds of food for the mind. And as with external food, there’s junk food for the mind and good food for the mind. Breath meditation is one of the good foods, because you’re working with a good intention. You’re trying to find a source of nourishment for the mind that doesn’t get you into trouble and doesn’t cause trouble for other people, other beings. That reflection we had on food just now is to remind us that whenever you’re born, you’re not born with a meal ticket. First your parents have to find food for you, then you have to spend your life looking for food. And there’s a lot of suffering in the process, not only for you but also for other people in the food chain. Even if you’re a vegetarian, all the people who have to work to get the food to you to clean up the leftovers. So you have to stop and think. How about the feeding for your mind? Does your feeding for the mind also create trouble for yourself and for others? Where can you go to find a source of food, a source of nourishment, that doesn’t place burdens on anyone at all? We’ve got the breath here. We feed on the breath to strengthen the mind. Our intention is to be mindful and to be alert. Mindful means holding something in mind. In this case, you’re holding in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath and that any other thoughts that come up in the course of the meditation, at least for the time being, you’re going to let them go. Let them go with goodwill, not with anger. Try not to get angry at the mind. If you find it wandering off, just keep expressing goodwill for yourself, goodwill for anybody who may come into your thoughts, and say, for the time being, “You’ve got to work with the breath.” The same way that the person who’s learning how to be a musician has to be alone for a while to play on the instrument to get good at it. Then you come back to the breath and try to breathe in a way, each time you come back to the breath, breathe in a way that feels especially refreshing. Make it a reward for coming back. Make it really delicious. Learn to be a connoisseur. What kind of breathing really feels good right now? Where in the body are you most sensitive to the ins and outs of the breath? For some people, it’s down in the middle of the chest, in the area of the heart. For other people, it’s more in the throat. For some people, it’s in the middle of the head. It can be anywhere at all in the body. Ask yourself, “What kind of breath energy would that part of the body like right now? What would feel really, really good, really gratifying?” And you realize you can provide yourself with that breathing without having to take anything away from anybody. This is important because if we don’t have a good source of food inside, we go out nibbling off other people, nibbling off things outside. As with our food, it’s very easy to be blind to the burdens we’re placing on others as we feed off of them, the burdens we place on the world as we try to feed off the things in the world—status, material things, relationships. If you’ve got a good source of food inside, you can deal with real, genuine kindness with other people because you’re not trying to feed off of them. This is how the brahmavaharas, those sublime attitudes that we were chanting just now, all are part of one state of mind which is well-fed inside. You feel goodwill for others. That goodwill expresses itself as compassion when you see other people are suffering. It expresses itself as empathetic joy when you see that they’re happy, because you’re not trying to feed off them, or you’re not fighting them, or a source of food, physical or mental. When you’re not feeding off people outside, when you’re not feeding off areas where you can’t make a change, where you can’t be of help, it’s not that you’re indifferent or don’t care. It’s just that you’re no longer feeding on those areas, and so you can be equanimous about them. This is how we learn patience, by feeding ourselves so that we don’t have to constantly go feeding off of other things. The things we don’t like about the world are things that we’re trying to gobble up all the time. Then we realize, “This doesn’t taste good. This makes me sick.” You blame the things that you’re trying to eat. Instead, you should turn around and look at your feeding habits. Here’s the breath. Here’s your sense of the body. The breath energy or the breath property in the body is not just the in-and-out breathing, but flows throughout the body. Once the in-and-out breathing feels good, you can allow that to mingle with the other energy flows in the body. That’s really satisfying, really nourishing. It feels really, really good. So learning to get the mind to settle down here, to be at ease here, it’s not a matter of forcing it. You’re giving it something good to feed on. You’re changing your feeding habits. This will have an impact not only on the power balance in your own mind, but also on the way you weigh on the world outside. Unless you have to feed off of outside, the freer you are. It’s like wandering out in the wilderness. Sometimes when you just like to go, go, go, wander, then stop wherever you like. Go for as long as you like. But you can carry only so much food. The fact that you have to feed places limitations on you. But if the mind doesn’t need to feed, then it’s really in good shape. Learning how to feed on the breath. This is not the end of the practice. This is the path. As the mind gets stronger, you find that there’s a dimension in the mind that doesn’t need to feed on anything at all. This was the Buddha’s special discovery. Back in his days, a lot of philosophy was actually concerned with how does the mind keep on feeding? What happens when you die? What can you feed on then? What survives death? And what does it need to feed on? What does it have to feed on? People who longed for eternal life realized that it required an eternal source of food. The Buddha’s solution was to find a part of the mind that doesn’t need to feed at all. It’s totally self-sufficient. It doesn’t have to depend on anything. And it’s through bringing the mind to concentration and learning to look at our feeding habits that the word for clinging is also the word for taking substance. We suffer because we feed on things. We feed off of form and feeling and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness. That’s why we suffer. And the aggregates themselves, even though they may have some stress, they don’t weigh on the mind unless you try to feed on them. They find something in the mind that doesn’t need to feed. There’s true freedom. Everybody gets their freedom. This is why, from the Buddha’s point of view, there is no distinction between practicing for your own benefit and practicing for the benefit of others. Everybody benefits when you learn how to feed in a new way, when you learn how to strengthen the mind to the point where it can discover that internal dimension. Then you’re no longer a burden on anyone else, and you have no sense of being burdened inside. So pay attention to the breath you’ve got right here, right now. It’s really good food for the mind. And as with any food, you have to learn how to fix it. What kind of breathing is good for the body at any point in time? When it’s tired, what’s a good way to breathe? When it’s feeling sick, what’s a good way to breathe? When you’ve got a headache, what’s a good way to breathe? When your body chemistry is all out of whack, what’s a good way to breathe? So you can nourish the mind and give a sense of well-being to the body at the same time. You talk about the path not being any different from the goal. What they really mean is you focus all your attention on what you’re doing right here. You don’t have to worry about the goal, because by developing the path, that’s what gets you to the goal. So focusing on the breath is where you’re going to find all these good things. You’re going to bring your awareness to the present moment. You’re going to bring it really close to the mind. It’s right here, where the mind and the body meet, that you’re going to find what’s really good in terms of that inner dimension that doesn’t need to feed off of anything at all. It’s in the right spot. Just look really carefully and with a lot of sensitivity. And you’ll find a lot of interesting things along the way.

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