Your Inner Ally

February 2, 2013

The breath is always there. It’s simply a matter of tuning into it. Where do you feel the breath right now? It may be in the midst of a lot of other sensations. Of course, all the chattering voices in the mind. But try to ferret out where you feel the breath most clearly. And just hang on right there. As for everything else, you can let it go. As John Lee says, if you’re trying to chase everything down and get it really still, you’re going to be running around. It’s like chasing after your shadow. As you run after the shadow, the shadow keeps running away, running away. You can never catch it. So wherever else your thoughts may be spinning, you don’t have to chase them. You don’t have to spin after them. You can just stay right here. And gradually your attention will settle around it, like the layers of a pearl around a grain of sand. Things will begin to accrete, and this sense of a center will get more solid, more established. You don’t have to depend on your intentness. It helps if the breath is comfortable. And that’s something you can change, something you can work with. As we were saying this morning, there’s a lot in your present condition, a lot of different things you could be paying attention to. Your past karma is serving up all kinds of things. Your choice is where you’re going to focus your attention and what you’re going to do with what you notice there. That’s your present karma. And that’s where your freedom lies. You do have freedom of choice. And the more skill you bring to this freedom, the more the freedom begins to widen out. So always keep that in mind. Whatever else is coming up in the mind, you can choose where you want to focus your attention. It’s like reading a newspaper. If you tried to follow all the stories in the news, you wouldn’t have time for your own life. So you select which issues are most important, and for everything else you just let it go. Right now, the important issue is, what state is your mind in? Is it settled down? You’ve got the intention to settle down, but that intention needs allies, it needs friends, in order to be strong. Because there are a lot of other intentions buzzing around in your mind. You could be thinking about home, you could be thinking about your work, but you let that go. And you strengthen your intention to stay here by looking into this breath energy here in the body. The energy that allows the breath to come in and go out. Is it comfortable? Does it feel good? Is it as nourishing as it could be? Do you give it some space? Try to relax all the places in the body where you feel tension, as many as you can consciously relax. When you breathe in, think of the breath energy flowing everywhere throughout the body. You might think of it flowing up for a while to see how that feels. If that doesn’t feel good, if it’s giving you a headache, well, think of it flowing down, out to your feet, out to your hands. Whatever picture of breath energy seems to be giving the best results, hold that picture in mind. And you’re going to experiment with lots of different pictures. John Lee sometimes talks about the breath energy going down the spine. Sometimes he talks about it coming up the spine. Sometimes he talks about the breath energy coming in right at the middle of the chest and going down through your intestines. And other times it’s the breath energy that comes into the navel and goes up the front of the body. So the breath can flow in lots of different directions. And your perception, your mental image of the breath flowing, will have a huge effect on how the energy moves. So right now you want to take advantage of that. The breath is your ally here. Remember, you always want to be on friendly terms with your breath. What does it mean to be on friendly terms? Well, you listen to it. What feels good? What does it seem to need? Then provide that. It’s like becoming a true friend with someone. You’re not the one doing all the talking all the time. You’ve got to listen. You’ve got to see what that person needs, to see what that person wants, to get a sense of not only what the person is saying, but what the person is doing. Be observant. Is this someone you can trust? How would you know? What do you look for? That’s the same with the breath. Sometimes the breath may seem comfortable, immediately may seem good, but if you stick with it too long, it turns into something uncomfortable. So realize you can’t trust that fully. You’ve got to keep watching the condition of the body. Notice whether the energy level seems to be too high and frenetic or too low and sluggish. And if you’re giving the breath as an antidote, you begin to notice that you’ve given too much. In trying to calm things down, you may put yourself to sleep. Or in trying to energize things, you may get a little bit too high strung. So you’ve got to watch and observe and adjust and keep watching and observing and adjusting. In the chant we had just now, the Buddha talks about getting the mind into concentration. In the beginning, it requires direct thought and evaluation. You keep directing your thought and your attention to the breath, and then you evaluate it. You’re evaluating both the breath and the quality of your attention. You’re trying to figure out what kind of breathing will feel best and what kind of attention. In other words, it is possible to focus too strongly on the breath to the point where you’re constricting it. So you look at that. And when the breath starts getting comfortable, what do you do then? We talked earlier this morning about delusion concentration, where things get comfortable and you leave the breath and start focusing on the sense of pleasure. You don’t want to destroy the sense of pleasure. You just stay with the breath. You know the pleasure is right there, but that’s not the primary spot of your focus. Again, you want to stay with that sensation of the breathing. And then think of how you can make that pleasure spread to the different parts of the body. This way you strengthen your ally in getting the mind to settle down. So remember, you’re not going to get everything totally still. Some people think they have to get everything totally still before they can get the mind to settle down. Years back, when I was in Wat Thammasat, a monk came to visit. He was complaining that there was no quiet place in Thailand to practice. So I sent him up to the top of the hill, which was the quietest spot in the monastery. He came down and complained that one of the farmers in the valley below was running his water pump. And I must admit, my reaction was, “Well, sorry.” So your breath is still there. The water pump doesn’t destroy your breath. The sound of the water pump is not destroying your breath. Even if you go into a cave, you’ve got the sound of your ears, the blood going through your ears. There’s always going to be sounds. There’s always going to be distractions. You’ve got to make up your mind. You’re going to stay focused right here in spite of them. Remind yourself that they’re not really important. Once, when I was in Korea, I visited a music school. And in their music school, it wasn’t like music school here in the States, where each performer has his or her own little room to practice. There were just little booths all around this one large open room, and everybody was practicing his or her. Especially there were singers, and there were kayagum players, and drum players. And they had to learn how to focus in the midst of all that noise. And they were able to do it. So you have the noise of your own mind. You just make up your mind. You’re not going to pay attention to it. You’re going to pay attention to the sensation of the breath and hang on to that. And gradually your attention will build and build and build around that spot. That’ll give you a good place to settle down. So you can’t wait for the quiet to come first. You’ve got to make your intention strong and hold on to that intention. Then use the breath as your friend and maintain that intention. Listen to your friend. If you don’t know the friend very well, be very quiet and pay attention. Then you’ll find that it has a lot to teach you.

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