An Ally in the Breath

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Sit comfortably, and take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the sensation of breathing. You feel it in different parts of the body. But allow your attention to settle on whatever spot the breathing feels most blatant, where you know now the breath is coming in, where you know now the breath is going out. And allow the breath at that spot to feel comfortable. Don’t clamp down on it. Let the breath have its freedom. You’re trying to get the mind to settle down. You’re trying to train the mind so it can stay focused. One of the ways of helping it stay focused is to create a pleasant sensation through the way you breathe. The breath is useful that way. It’s one of the few processes of the body that can be both automatic and willed. So you take advantage of the fact that it can be willed and push it in a comfortable direction. You can either experiment with different ways of breathing. If long breathing doesn’t feel good after a while, you can try shorter breathing. You can make the breath deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to get a sense of what really feels good for the body right now. After all, the breath is the energy of life. It’s what keeps your body and mind together. And if the breath energy feels good, it’s going to be good for the body and good for the mind. The trick is learning how to stay here. This is where the training aspect comes in. You want the mind to be more under your control. Because if the mind is out of control, it’s like a herd of cats that goes running off in all directions. And you find yourself thinking things that you would rather not think, or thinking things that actually make you suffer. And often it has no real purpose at all. I mean, there are things that you have to think about that are difficult and have to be thought through. But there are so many things in life that are just random thoughts that come into the mind, and you create a lot of difficulties for them. So you want a little more control over the different members of the mind. It’s like a big committee. It’s not like there’s one person in there. It’s like there are many different people with many different ideas, many different agendas. And you want to bring some order to the committee. So what you do is you try to figure out which members of the committee are really interested in what you’re doing. And here, action doesn’t mean just actions of the body, but also means the intentional actions in your mind. When you decide you’re going to think about something, you decide you’re going to focus on something, you want to ask yourself which thoughts are really helpful, which thoughts are not so helpful. And as a general rule of thumb, thoughts that are based on sensual desire, thoughts that are based on ill will, thoughts that are based on wanting to harm either yourself or other people, those are going to cause suffering down the line. So you want to think in ways that avoid those problems. For example, with ill will, try to develop goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you, wishing for happiness. This doesn’t mean you have to like people or like certain aspects of yourself, even. It simply means that you have goodwill. You wish that you would find true happiness. You wish that other people would find true happiness. After all, think about what the world would be like if everybody had a sense of true happiness inside. It would be a much better place. So instead of tracking down people and trying to settle old scores, you say, “May they find true happiness. May they understand the causes for true happiness and act on them.” Then leave the matter at that. That way you don’t burden yourself with ill will. And you find that you can rely on yourself to act more skillfully when you’re dealing with difficult people, if you can have goodwill for them. That’s one way of training the mind, teaching it to think in ways that are skillful. But in order to keep up the training, you need strength. And this is where it’s important that you learn how to settle down in one spot. Because there is a sense of nourishment that comes when you stay with the breath coming in and going out, and it feels good. The mind gets to rest. It’s not wasting its energy on frivolous things. There’s a sense of wholeness in body and mind when you can settle down like this. When you find the breath getting comfortable, you may want to spread your sense of awareness throughout the body. So you’re aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. You may notice that there are subtle sensations in different parts of the body that go along with the breathing. So spread your awareness evenly, smoothly. If you don’t sense anything, just be aware of the whole body. Because having that larger frame of reference, with a sense of ease spreading through the body, enables the mind to settle down even more firmly. It increases the sense of well-being, at the same time making it more solid. This is one of your most important arsenals in learning how to train the mind, one of your most important skills. When you can access a sense of well-being simply by breathing and settling down like this, then when you get skilled at it, you can call on it at any time. When you feel tempted to say something or do something that you know would be unskillful, but you find it hard to resist because you think there’d be a little bit of pleasure there one way or another, you remind yourself that there’s a greater pleasure that comes from simply breathing in an alert, mindful way. And as for any tension that may build up in different parts of the body when you’re thinking thoughts, say, of anger or greed or fear, just breathe right through them. Let them dissolve. This is where you get to use your sense of being centered here in the body, centered here with the breath, to good purpose. You’re training the mind, both giving it a place where it can gather its strength, and giving it tools in learning how to overcome ways of thinking that you’d later regret. So this is an important skill to work at. In the beginning, it seems kind of tedious because your mind is used to wandering around, flying off anywhere at once, and having it stay in one spot. The beginning goes against the grain. But then as you work to make this spot a comfortable, interesting place to stay, you find more and more that this really is where you’d like to be. And it really does change the balance of power in the mind. So the greed, aversion, and delusion have less power over you, and your powers of mindfulness, alertness, your concern for finding a really true happiness, get stronger. So get acquainted with the breath. Have the breath on your side. Otherwise, it becomes a tool for anger or greed. When you get angry, the breath gets really uncomfortable and you get a really strong sense that you’ve just got to get something out of your system. It’s because of the way you’ve been breathing. But what happens instead is that you act on the anger or act on whatever the emotion is. Then you later regret it. Because you’re afraid that if you didn’t act on it, you’d be bottling it up and it would turn into the thing going underground for a while, then coming up someplace else. But if you can learn how to breathe calmly in the face of anger, breathe calmly in the face of fear or envy or whatever unskillful emotions there are, that helps to weaken them. And now you’ve got the breath on your side. So take some time to get to know it, because you’ll come to the realization that the breath is a really good friend to have.

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