Basic Breath Instructions

June 22, 2013

We start with thoughts of goodwill to remind ourselves of why we’re meditating. We’re here because we want to achieve happiness. That’s goodwill for ourselves. And we want happiness that’s harmless. That’s showing goodwill for other beings. Because all too often, the way people find pleasure and happiness in the world is oppressive to somebody else. But the happiness that comes from within doesn’t have to oppress anyone at all. You sit here, breathing, getting the mind to settle down, be one with the breath in the present moment, and find a sense of well-being that way. My father visited one time when I was in Thailand, and so we talked about having a practice of meditation, too. And his question was, “Well, he’s Christian. Does it make any difference? Is that going to be an obstacle?” And Jon Fuhrer, my teacher, said, “No, we’re going to focus on the breath. The breath doesn’t belong to anybody. It’s not specifically Buddhist or Christian or Muslim or anything. It’s common property in the world.” When you get the mind to settle down with the breath, you get to see your own mind in action. And that’s what we talk about. What your mind is doing right now. But to see it clearly, you have to try to make it still. Notice the word “try.” You can’t expect to get it to settle down completely and totally right at the very beginning. It’s going to take a while. It’s going to take some effort. And in the course of making the effort, you’re going to see a lot of things in the mind already, some of which you just see and you put aside, some of which you have to deal with a little bit before you can put them aside. Some thoughts that have a lot of Velcro on them that are really sticky. You have to figure out some way to shave off the Velcro. From the beginning, just simply focus on the fact that you want to stay with the breath. And breathe in and out. Notice where you feel the breathing. That’s what you want to focus on. Because when we think of the breath here, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the sensation of energy, movement in the body, the energy flow that allows the air to come in and lets it go out. That’s what you actually feel directly. That’s what you’re going to focus on. So when you take some good long deep in-and-out breaths, you can ask yourself, “Does that movement of energy feel good in the body? Is it refreshing?” If it does, keep it up. And if it doesn’t, you can change. Make the breath shorter, more shallow, or even deeper. Heavier, lighter, faster, slower. There are lots of different ways you can vary the breath. So experiment to see what feels best right now. This gives you something a little bit more interesting to do than just watch in-and-out, in-and-out. You’re exploring the sensation of having a body right here. And now the process of breathing is refreshing, it is energizing. After all, without the breath, you wouldn’t be alive. And if you find your thoughts wander off in other directions, you don’t have to follow them. Just let them go and you come back. And you’ll be right here at the breath, because the breath is always here. It’s always here in the present moment. And there’s always an aspect of your awareness that’s here in the present moment. So those are the two things you want to keep together and the things that you want to stay with as much as you can. Some people complain that their mind wanders off and they have to pull it back. You don’t really pull it back. You just let go of the thought and you’re right here, automatically. Each time you’re back, the mind wanders off. Breathe in a way that’s especially comfortable. Because sometimes that’s one of the reasons why the mind wanders off is the breath isn’t really as comfortable as it could be. Because you’ll find as you begin to settle down, relax into the breath, relax into the body, that simply the process of breathing can be very refreshing, very nourishing. And you’re content just to stay right there. But until that point, you’ve got some exploring to do. Once you’ve noticed how the breath feels in the areas where it’s most obvious, you begin to notice that there are more subtle sensations that go with the breathing. And eventually you’ll find that they’re all over the body. So it’s useful to think about relaxing the body. Maintaining your straight posture. Don’t lean over while you do this, but think of relaxing any patterns of tension you may feel in the different parts of the body. You can watch, for example, your abdomen as you breathe in and breathe out. If you feel any tightness or tension, they’re allowed to relax and to stay relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then you can move up to the area around the stomach and then the area in the chest and your neck. And you can move down the shoulders, out through the arms, down the back, to the hips, and out through the legs. Just make a survey of the body. You can do this many times if you like. Many times you’ll think that you’ve cleared up all the tension the first time around, but then you go through a second time and you realize there are some subtle areas of tension that you missed, or there are some parts where the tension came back after you left. This survey of the body helps get you out of the head. It gives you a firmer grounding so you’re not so quick to run off with different thoughts. And you may actually notice that when a thought appears in the mind, there’s going to be a pattern of tension in one part of the body. If you release that pattern of tension and allow it to relax, the thought will stop. That’s an interesting lesson to learn. We carry a lot of thoughts around with us. We’re also carrying a lot of tension around with us. So here’s some time to relax, to gather your strength, to put down your burdens. Because the mind needs time by itself, for itself, like this. Otherwise it gets worn out. It’s like a knife that you keep on using and never sharpen. It can still cut through things, but it takes a lot more energy and it does a very sloppy job. Whereas if you sharpen the knife, all you have to do is get one chop and you cut right through things. So we’re sharpening the mind as we get it to settle down like this. Because it’s not simply relaxing. You’ve got to develop certain qualities of mind in order to stay with the breath and just drift off into the relaxation. One of them is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. And the other is alertness, the ability to watch what’s going on. And there’s a third quality. It’s called ardency, which you really try to do this well. There may be a part of the mind that says, “Well, here, you’ve got a whole hour. You can think about whatever you want.” Well, you’ve been thinking about whatever you want for a long, long time. And it hasn’t really gotten you anything special. Here’s something new you can try, a new talent, a new skill you can learn, how to get the mind to settle down. Drop its thoughts, gather its strength, and then maintain its stillness with full alertness. This involves getting to know the breath. And in the course of getting to know the breath, you’re going to get to know the mind. You’re going to get to know the mind, partly simply in tackling the problem of getting the mind to settle down. Because you’ll find that there are lots of different voices that want to take you someplace else. And you have to learn how to say no to them in an effective way. And sometimes just saying no is enough, and sometimes it’s not nearly enough. This is why we have some of the alternative meditation topics to deal with problems that are really tricky, like goodwill for people who’ve hurt us, harmed us, or harmed people we love. Or you’re sitting here and you don’t want to get involved in long narratives about how you’ve been suffering in this lifetime, or how other people have been oppressing you or oppressing people you love. That doesn’t accomplish anything. So you say, “Well, may that person be happy.” And that means, “May that person understand the causes for true happiness and act on them.” You’re not engaging in wishful thinking with a little magic wand in your hand. But that’s the best thought you can have in order to disentangle yourself from all the issues you’ve got with that person, at least for the time being. Or that other chant we had this evening, the contemplation of death. Death could come at any time. Are you ready to go? This is useful for dealing with a mind that’s lazy and doesn’t want to do any work. It doesn’t want to develop good qualities. You’ve got to realize, at the point of death, you’re really going to need your mindfulness, your alertness. You have to have your wits about you so that you don’t suffer. And how are you going to do that? Well, you develop these qualities right here, right now, with the breath. So basically what these alternative topics are are ways of thinking that can help cut through your other thoughts and bring you back to the breath. When you’re feeling discouraged about your practice, you can remind yourself of all the people in the path who’ve started off with a lot more problems than you have right now. And yet we’re able to work through those problems, through the meditation, and find a genuine happiness inside. So if you find that a particular problem or particular thought is hard to let go, you can try some of these alternative ways. You can contemplate with the purpose of being able, finally, to let that thought go and then come back to the breath. So it’s not just brute force of will that keeps you here. You’ve got to have some understanding about what there is in the mind that’s going to keep you from settling down and how you can get around it, at the same time as the mind gets more and more quiet, even if it’s just for little bits and pieces of time. You’ll find that enables you to see things even more clearly. So this is how discernment and concentration go together. The more you understand how to deal with the mind’s greed, aversion, and delusion, the more solidly you’ll be able to settle down. The more you can settle down, the better weapons you have against your greed, aversion, and delusion. And the more clearly you can see the really subtle movements of the mind, the more you can see these things before they build up into something big and overwhelming. So take this time to get to know the breath. And getting to know the breath, you’re going to get to know your mind. A lot of times we don’t like to see what’s in the mind, but remember, everybody faces all kinds of stuff in their minds. You’re not the only person who has greed, or aversion, or delusion, or jealousy, or fear, or any of the other emotions. Emotions that you find uncomfortable. They’re all there. Everybody’s got them, except for people who’ve fully trained the mind. But they had them before when they got started, too. So this is how they went about straightening things out. So not only are you facing the things that are going to come up in your mind, but you’ve got tools to deal with them. This is what’s special. You can learn how to straighten your own mind out. It’s useful to think of the mind as being like a committee. You’ve got the committee members who want to meditate right now, and you’ve got the committee members who don’t want to meditate right now. And for the time being, you want to identify with the ones who are here to focus on the breath. As for the other ones, you don’t have to identify them. Just think of them as voices floating around. But if boredom comes up, you don’t have to say, “I’m bored.” It’s just, “Okay, there’s a feeling of boredom, but that’s just one member of the committee.” Laziness comes in. Okay, that doesn’t have to be your laziness. It’s just a feeling that’s there in the mind. In other words, you get to choose which you you want to be right now. And if, through force of habit, you slip off into some of the other members, you can drop them at any time you want and come back to the members who want to be here right now. And use the breath as your lure to bring the mind back here to the present moment. In other words, try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. After all, it is the force of life. It’s what keeps your body and mind together. The more comfortable the breath, the more energizing, the more refreshing, the better it’s going to be, both for the body and the mind. So even if the mind doesn’t settle down fully during this hour, you’re working in the right direction, and both the body and mind are going to benefit from whatever little bits and pieces of time you give to open things up inside. Let the breath energy flow. Let the mind settle down. I guess it’s these little bits and pieces that finally begin to connect and join the whole thing. The branches come closer and closer together, and then they begin to connect. So learn how to value even little bits and pieces of concentration. Because it’s from them that the larger states of concentration, the more satisfying, the more refreshing ones, can grow.

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