Stop Trampling on the Breath

February 16, 2014

Pay attention to the breath because it’s the basis for our inner sense of well-being, both physical and mental. The breath is where the body and the mind meet. And for them to stay together peacefully and in harmony, the breath has to be in good shape. Which means you have to sensitize yourself to how the breath feels as it comes in, as as it goes out, the energy that allows the air to come in and go out, how that flows through the body, where it feels blocked, where it feels like it’s missing or weak. These are things we have to pay attention to. Most often we don’t. We sensitize ourselves to all kinds of other things in life. For some people, we get very sensitive to other people’s feelings. It begins to take precedence over our own sense of ourself. In other cases, we get very sensitive to our greed. In other words, we follow it, listen to it, or our anger, our various desires for things. We basically run roughshod over the source of energy that keeps the body and the mind together. It becomes an area that we’re very insensitive to, and we allow a lot of stress to build up. So for many of us, as we come to the meditation, we have to take some time to let these layers of stress fall away. This requires sensitivity and it requires patience. It’s like we’re becoming friends with the breath. As the Buddha once said, to really know someone, you have to spend a lot of time with that person and be very observant. And the same applies here. You have to spend time with a person and their breath. If we try for a quick fix, that often creates more problems than it solves. So be willing to take the hour. Take a lot of time. Sometimes it’s not just an hour. It takes days, weeks, months to get sensitive to how things are going on inside, to get a sense of when it’s proper to change things and how you change them. In some cases, you change them by putting a little pressure here or a little pressure there, or consciously relaxing the muscles here or there. And sometimes it has to be simply a matter of changing your thinking, holding a different image of the body and mind. So you have to sensitize yourself to that. You also have to sensitize yourself to how to become patient, how to talk to yourself, how to keep your spirits up as you wait for things to resolve themselves inside. So you remind yourself, one, of all the time you’ve spent ignoring this part of the body and how you trample over it. So it’s going to take a while to let things recover. It’s like the land in Canada that’s still recovering from the last ice age. You know, it’s ten thousand plus years and the land is still recovering. Hopefully, in our case, it’s not going to take ten thousand years to recover from the way we’ve been misusing or ignoring and trampling over the breath. But it’s important not to get discouraged. You remind yourself that everybody has to go through this. In some cases it takes longer than in others. But it’s a common process, a common talent that’s needed, the ability to try to get things as comfortable as you can in the present and when you run up against somebody you can’t change while you have learned how to sit with it. Give it a little space. Be gentle. Listen to it in the sense of being sensitive to it. And gradually it’ll begin to reveal itself. And John Lee has a nice talk where he talks about how the body first is going to resist your efforts to become friendly. It’s like talking to somebody who’s not ready to trust you. So you just keep talking and talking and talking. In other words, make comments on the breath here, make comments on the breath there, then check on it to see if the comments are actually in line with what’s happening. And wait and listen. Look some more. And as John Lee says, eventually you’ll start giving one-word answers, little bits and pieces of understanding as to how you’ve been holding the body in certain ways and how you’ve been holding the breath in certain ways that are not helpful, and how you can begin to let go. And as you keep asking questions and observing, the answers will grow longer and more informative, and eventually you really do become friends. And it’s not the case that you’re going to totally understand the breath at some point. You keep learning new things about the breath because, of course, the body’s going to keep doing new things as well. As it gets older, certain functions begin to become less automatic. Things that you took for granted you can’t take for granted anymore. So you have to learn to deal with that. But at the very least, you’ve established a good relationship and you have some idea of what works and what doesn’t work. And while you’re waiting for things to unravel themselves, learn how to take some pleasure in the areas where you can make the breath go as you want it to. Again, it’s John Lee. He says it’s like going into a house where some of the floorboards are rotten. If you lie down in those spots, you fall through the floor. So you take care to lie in the areas where the floor is strong, solid. So even though there may be parts of the body that are very tight and don’t seem to respond to any way of breathing or any way of thinking about the breath, find some area around them or in some other part of the body where you can establish a beating. Find a beachhead where you can establish a good relationship. And often the fact that you can get on good terms with some part of the body, it’s almost as if you’re trying to convince the other part of the body that’s not responding that you can be trusted, that you’re not going to keep running roughshod over it when suddenly some desire comes up or some anger comes up or some other issue, inside or outside, comes up. In other words, you’re giving importance to this relationship. And part of you may say it’s selfish, but it’s not. This is something you’ve got to care for and nobody else can. And if you don’t do it now, when is it going to happen? It doesn’t get easier as you get older. And in so many cases, it’s like learning how to take care of your own health. You’re less of a burden on other people. If you know what kind of food to eat, what kind of exercise to get, what things to avoid, what things to do, the fact that you’re taking care of your health is not a selfish thing. If it becomes obsessive and that’s all you can think about, then it becomes a problem. But if you look after yourself well, you become less of a burden on other people. The difference here is that meditation can get obsessive and it’s not bad. Chan Phuong once said that you have to be really crazy about the meditation to do it well. In other words, think about the breath all the time that you can. Any spare moment, you go to the breath. Check in on how things are going, the breath energy in the different parts of the body. That’s something you can do throughout the day. Have a sense that this is both your friend and your home. Make this your main hobby, a thing that you do because you want to do it. And you want to do it well. There are parts of the mind that say that other things are more important. The way you look after your own mind is the most important thing of all. Because if your mind is not in good shape, then you can’t do anything well. If your heart is not in good shape, you can’t do anything well. In Buddhism, they don’t make a clear distinction. In fact, in most Buddhist languages, in other words, languages where Buddhism is spread, “heart” and “mind” are the same word. Your thoughts and your emotions, they all go together, and we’re trying to heal them both. So it’s not just an intellectual exercise, and it’s not just a matter of lots of oomph in your goodwill or lots of oomph in your desire for peace, your desire for health. The two have to go together. You have to learn how to figure things out so your desire for peace really does get results, it really does understand cause and effect, and that your thinking really is devoted to true well-being, true goodness inside. So this is the area right here where the mind and the body meet. This is what you want to become sensitive to. Sensitive to how it’s going, sensitive to when it’s not going well, sensitive to when it is going well, and when it’s not going well, sensitive to how you can change it and not mess things up. When it is going well, how you can maintain that and allow that sense of well-being to develop. So try to get acquainted with this area of your awareness, because it’s where all the important things are happening and where all the good things can be found.

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