Make the Breath Your Home

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Try to be at home with your breathing. You know that phrase that says it takes a heap of living to make a house a home? Well, it takes a heap of time and attention to make the breath your home, because the mind is so used to wandering out, getting involved with things outside, engaging with the world outside, that it doesn’t have much time to settle in and be at home right here. Just when you settle it in with the breath, it seems strange and very easy to slip off. But to make it like a home, you have to learn how to make it comfortable. This is the function of the direct thought and evaluation. When we think of concentration, we tend to think of states of mind where there’s no thinking at all. But you can’t get there until you’ve put everything together—the mind and the body and the breath. Your mindfulness and your alertness and your ardency—everything has to be focused together. And it takes a while for them to make a good fit. You might be thinking too much, or the mind might get so quiet that you begin to just drift off and not really know where you are. And then there’s that question about what kind of breathing is best for the body right now. And there’s nobody here to tell you. There’s no checklist. There’s nobody looking over your shoulder to say you should breathe a little bit longer now or a little bit shorter. You have to learn how to observe on your own. This is what discernment means—learning to develop your own powers of observation and learning to focus them in the right place. Well, the right place is right here. And so the first issue is how to get to stay right here continually with a sense of ease, with a sense of well-being, with a sense of energy and nourishment. So what kind of bed does the mind like? What kind of couches does it like? What kind of tables and chairs? Sometimes, you want a rhythm of breathing that’s energetic. Sometimes, you want something that’s calming. So try out different kinds of breathing and see what the mind finds easiest to stay with, which kind of breathing has the best effect on the mind. At the same time, go into the mind and look into what kind of thinking has the best effect on the breath. You might ask yourself, when you breathe in and breathe out, what kind of picture do you have in the mind? You might think of the muscles of the chest doing most of the breathing, or the abdomen, muscles of the shoulders. How about replacing that with a different picture? Think of all the nerves going down through your arms and legs. Think of them breathing, the blood vessels. Think of those breathing. Now they’re going to breathe in a very different way from the muscles of the chest or the shoulder. They don’t have to rise or fall. It’s more an issue of just opening up, a sense that everything feels connected inside the body. And when things are connected, then the energy can flow. Think of the breath going all the way down to your fingers, all the way down to your toes. You want to inhabit the body as fully as you can. To make this place a home, you want every nook and corner to be a comfortable place to be. So notice how you can get the mind to fit with the breath, how you can get the breath to fit with the mind. And in doing that, you’re working with the Four Noble Truths right there. Where there’s a sense of dis-ease in the breath, you look for the problem. You may want the breath to be one way, but you have to stop and ask, “Is that the way it really should be? Is that the best way for it to be?” You may have habitual ways of breathing that you’re used to and you’re comfortable with. But you can ask yourself, “Maybe I have to change things around a bit. I might have to rearrange the furniture inside the house for it to be really comfortable.” There’s a comfort here. As the Buddha says, it’s there to nourish you. But it’s also to provide a good foundation so you can learn how to be more mindful and alert, so you can see things as they are. Because they’re going to happen right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath. So to see things arising and passing away, when an intention comes, how quickly can you see it? When a feeling comes up, how quickly can you see it? To what extent do you find yourself just riding along with whatever comes? Can you learn how to step back and question that? It’s right here. So the comfort is good just because it feels soothing and it’s nourishing. And it puts you in a better mood to meditate. And that makes it possible for you to stay here continually and to see what’s going on, what’s coming, what’s going. In particular, you want to look for the movements of the mind. When a thought comes up, what effect does it have, both on the body and on the mind? Can you detect something that’s going to be troublesome even before it really forms clearly as to what kind of thought it might be or what kind of intention it might be? These thoughts and intentions start out as little stirrings, a little bit of movement, a little tangle of energy. And then you identify it either as something that’s happening in the body or as something that’s happening in the mind. And then if something’s happening in the mind, then the question is, “Do I want to go with this?” And then you just jump in and go. You’ve left your home and you’ve jumped into some old car. You don’t know who’s driving it. You don’t know where they’re going. You have to learn how to resist that temptation. Stay here. Stay at home. Then you find that when you’re staying here, the thoughts that used to travel and take you all over the place, they go only so far. It’s because you jump in that you give them power. There’s a story they tell in Thailand of an old sage who built the city of Lampun, about twenty, thirty miles away from Doi Suthep, which is the big mountain near Chiang Mai. He arranged to have a princess come from another city to become the queen of the town. And the chief of the hill tribes up on the mountain fell in love with the queen and wanted to propose marriage. She wasn’t interested. But he said, “Well, how about this? I’ll make a test of my strength. I’ll stand on the mountain and I’ll throw a spear. And if the spear lands in the city, I’ll throw three spears. If any of the spears land in the city, then you’ll be my queen. And if not, I’ll forget about it and stop bothering you.” So she agreed to that. But how could he throw a spear that far? Well, he had magic power. So he did his magic chants and he threw his first spear and it missed the city just by a few meters. This got her concerned. So she made a hat and did some of her own magic on the hat and sent it to him as he was getting ready to throw his second spear. She had changed her heart. So he put the hat on and that drained him immediately of all of his magic power. So he threw the second spear and it landed at the foot of the mountain. He realized he’d lost his magic power. So with the third spear, he threw it straight up in the air. And when it came down, he buried his chest and he died. You can take this as an analogy for the power that we give our thoughts. If you get fascinated with a thought, fascinated with a feeling, you can ride it all over the world. But the question is, where is it going to take you? If you don’t give it the power, you just step back and question it. Why should I go with this thought? I’ve gone with my thoughts so many times. I’ve gone with my feelings so many times. How about just watching it for a while? And you see it doesn’t go very far at all. You’re trying to maintain your frame of reference right here with the body, with the breath, and as long as there’s a sense of well-being right here. You’re not going to be so hungry to go chasing after your thoughts. You’re not hungering for the entertainment. You’re not hungering for whatever motivation it was that had you running at. You find that they hold less and less interest because you begin to see how they’re put together. This is one of the other benefits of concentration. In addition to making you more mindful and alert to what’s happening, you begin to see why things are happening, or what the Buddha calls “origination.” When something comes up in the mind, what stirred it up to begin with? What would cause you to run with it? When you see the why, you see the cause. When you see the connection between the cause and the effect, that’s when you can develop a sense of dispassion for these things. You see the cause here, as the Buddha says. The world is a slave to craving. It’s your craving that makes you go after these things. And we expend a lot of energy in our thinking, but then what do we get as a result? There are some results. If there were no results at all, we wouldn’t go for this, but we tend not to see it as the cause. Because we’re so obsessed with what little bit of pleasure we can get out of these things, we miss the cause that they entail. That’s when you step back and you begin to see how much energy goes into your thoughts and feelings and perceptions. And there are some that are useful. If you didn’t have useful thoughts, you wouldn’t be able to meditate. But there are so many other kinds of thoughts that just pull you away and leave you exhausted and give you a little bit of nourishment as a reward for going out. But it’s not worth it. You have to learn how to be a lot more selective about why you’re going, what you expect to get. Those instructions that the Buddha gave Rahula, they start out, of course, with your outside actions, but they apply here as well, simply when you’re going to think about something. What are you anticipating? Very rarely do we anticipate anything more than, “Well, this will be interesting,” or, “This will be entertaining,” or, “This will be educational.” But do we ever stop and look back on a thought and ask, “Well, what did you actually get out of that?” We don’t take stock of things. The concentration, by putting you right here at the present moment, allows you to see exactly what costs go into your thoughts and your feelings. Then you can compare the costs with the return and decide whether it’s worth it. Sometimes we realize that a lot of our feelings and thoughts aren’t worth it, but we don’t know any other alternative. That’s another reason why it’s good to settle down and learn how to be at home with the breath. This gives you the alternative. You can stay right here with a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home, so you don’t have to go wandering around out in the sun, out in the rain, out in the cold. You’ve got some shelter right here. As that chant says, the world itself offers no shelter. All your possessions, all your relationships, can get blown away very quickly, very easily. Or you develop a good, solid sense of being at home right here. This is a different kind of shelter. Even though the shelter of concentration still is just fabricated, it still requires some effort. The payback is great, and it enables you to see deeper into the mind, into something that’s even more solid, something that the Buddha actually calls shelter. It’s one of the names for nirvana. Shelter, refuge, harbor, places of safety. So learn how to make this your safe place, and learn how to be at home with the breath. You’ll appreciate the well-being that it offers.

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