Interested in the Breath

September 30, 2014

Every night we start with thoughts of goodwill to remind us of why we’re here meditating. We want a happiness that’s special. Special in the sense that it’s reliable and it’s blameless. It harms nobody. It really is a special kind of happiness, because you think about the way most people look for happiness in the world. They don’t put much thought into who’s going to be affected, what the cost and what the horror might be. They go for the pleasure, they go for the happiness. It’s like a hit. We’ve done that ourselves many times. We decide it’s time to change, to look for happiness. It doesn’t harm us, it doesn’t harm anybody else. And we realize that we have to take responsibility for that. We have to train our minds. So the first step in training the mind is to get it to settle down, to get it to do what you want it to do. It’s like training an animal. If you have an animal that you’d like to have do work for you or at least stay in the house and not make a mess, you’ve got to show it that you mean business. But at the same time, you can’t be too harsh. There have to be immediate rewards. That’s one of the reasons why we focus on the breath. You take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice how that feels. Notice where you feel it in the body. Notice how the in-breath feels, how the out-breath feels. And then ask yourself, “Does it feel good?” Is there another way you could breathe that would feel better? Longer breathing? Shorter? Faster? Slower? Heavier? Lighter? Deeper? More shallow? You think of the breath being broad, you can think of it being narrow. You think of the whole body breathing. Every cell in your body can have its share of the breath energy. Because the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It wouldn’t come in and out if there weren’t a flow of energy in the body. And it’s that sense of flow that you want to focus on. And that can go through the whole nervous system. So take some time to be right here with the breath. Get to know it. Get to explore it. Try to be as sensitive as you can to the breathing. As for any other thoughts that come up, you can put them aside. They don’t deal with the breath. They’re not relevant right now. They just got in the way. So even if they seem to be important, sudden insights into the world, or sudden insights into yourself, or thoughts about what you’ve got to do tomorrow, no matter how insistent they may seem, they’re not relevant right now. What’s relevant is training the mind to do what you tell it to do. And if it can’t stay in one spot for more than a few seconds, you’re in trouble. Because the mind can then just do all kinds of stuff. You make up your mind you want true happiness, and it goes looking for its old pleasures. So you’ve got to bring it back. Bring it back. And learn how not to listen to it when it starts telling you, “This thought is really important,” or “That thought is something you’ve got to think about now.” There’s plenty of time after the meditation’s over. So for the time being, everything that comes up in the mind that’s not related to the breath, you just want to let go. Let go. And you don’t have to tie up any loose ends if the thought has a few. If it has a few frayed edges, you don’t have to tuck them in. Just think of the thought dispersing, and you’ll be back with the breath. Another thought may come up, and think of that dispersing as well. Like clouds that go over the mountains here. Have you ever been in the desert when it’s raining on this side of the mountains? You see the clouds come up over the mountain and they just evaporate. They’re already vapor, but then they just disappear totally. Think of your awareness of having the same effect on your other thoughts, any thought that’s not related to the breath. Things that are related to the breath actually can be made part of the concentration. Because to get the mind to settle down, you have to think it down. Think about the breath, evaluate the breath, and it’s in the thinking and evaluating that you get more and more into the breath. You’ll find it’s more and more interesting, this flow of energy in the body. If you have any chronic pains or illnesses, the breath can be really useful. Once you start thinking of the breath as energy in the nerves, energy flowing through the muscles, energy flowing down through the blood vessels. You can think of it loosening up patterns of tension, patterns of tightness, and sometimes your chronic pains can lessen or sometimes even go away. So you’ve got this whole field of energy here in the body, and you want to learn how to use it well. It’s free. It’s a medicine that doesn’t require that you take it from anybody else or have to buy it from anyone else. It’s there, moving in the body already. It’s just a matter of learning how to get sensitive to it and getting a sense of what it can be used for. What’s a good way to breathe when you’re tense? What’s a good way to breathe when you’re tired? You want to bring things back into balance. There’s plenty to explore here, and this is one of the ways of keeping your distracted thoughts away. Just get really, really interested in the breath. When you get more solidly established here, then you can start dealing more directly with the thoughts that would pull you away, because you’ve got a good foundation. But you want to work on making this foundation solid, because when you start dealing with your thoughts, if this foundation isn’t solid, you find yourself getting thoughts worming their way into you and you worming your way into the thoughts. And all of a sudden you’re off in Hoboken, New Jersey, someplace. So try to keep this foundation solid. You’re with the body right here, right now. The breath is the most immediate part of your awareness of the body. Think about it. If you didn’t have the breath coming in and going out, how would you know that there was a body here to begin with? It’s through the breath energy and the nerves that we know that there’s a body here and that we can use the body, we can move it around. The breath is the interface between your mind and your awareness, on the one hand, and the body on the other. So try to stay right here. Stay on this level of your awareness. Don’t go extrapolating out into the world outside or the worlds of your thoughts or your identity of who you are. It’s just you right here, just awareness right here, or the sensations of the breath — everything in the body that you sense right now. Think of it coming through the breath. That loosens things up quite a lot right there. Even though this isn’t the ultimate happiness, it certainly is food along the path. We need this sense of well-being. We need to have a sense of being nourished with our meditation. Otherwise the meditation gets dry. And the mind starts to rebel. So as you’re training the mind, make sure that you feed the mind well. When it’s well-fed, it starts getting a lot easier to do it, a lot easier to train in the direction you want it to go, to find that happiness that doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm anybody. And that’s totally satisfying. A happiness like that is rare, and it’s more than worth all the work we put into it.

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