Give Yourself to the Breath

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The ajahns often comment on how the practice is one thing all the way through. That one thing is generosity, giving. You give things, you give time, you learn to give up your opinions, finally you learn to give up your defilements. Then you even give up your attachment to good and evil. You give up all fabrications and all the various ways of giving tend to strengthen one another. As the Buddha once said, if you’re stingy, you’ll never be able to make it in ajahna, and no hope for getting any of the noble attainments. Which is why we have this custom every year to get in. They call it celebrating the kettin the night before, celebrating the generosity of the donors. Because we want to encourage generosity, not because it comes to us. We want to appreciate their generosity and remind ourselves that whatever way we can be generous is a good thing. You start with outside generosity and it works in. You’ve learned that giving things to other people, even though it may seem counterintuitive when you’re a little kid and all you can think about is getting, but when you give things to other people, you find that you feel happier as a result. Both sides have benefited. Then you learn how to give up your unskillful actions. That’s what the precepts are. The Buddha talks about this as being a gift, a universal gift, to all beings. You give safety. You’re not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants. That way you give safety to others. And when you make that precept a precept across the board, it becomes a universal precept, a universal gift. All aspects of the training involve a gift, a giving up sometimes. To find yourself holding back means you’re not going to benefit from that part of the training. When you say, “I give so much and only so far, and no further,” that becomes a limitation on yourself. In this aspect of the training, I remember when I was staying with Ajahn Phuong, he said he wanted me to be a hundred percent Thai, which meant I had to give up all my Western assumptions and all my Western habits and Western opinions about things and be willing to give his training a try, a serious try. And I benefited as a result. So when I look around and see people giving of their energy only so much and then say, “Okay, that’s it, that’s as far as it goes,” it’s like that story the Buddha tells about the elephant that holds its trunk back when it’s fighting. It hasn’t really given itself to the king in the same way. If you really give yourself to the practice, the more you give yourself to the practice, the better. That’s what it comes down to, particularly with the meditation. You want to give yourself one hundred percent to the breath right now. You’re right here. Whatever ideas you have about what you should be thinking about right now, just give them up for the time being. Say, “I want to be here with the breath.” Give it a try. What’s it like to stay with the breath continually, breath after breath after breath, and to give it full attention, not hold anything back in terms of how much you’re going to plunge into the breath? Allow the breath to surround you. You find that the less of you that’s in there, the less of the breath, the less of you that’s leaving just awareness in the breath, the more you gain. This is the whole principle. When you give up like this, give things up, it doesn’t mean that you’re going to be poor. You find that there’s a lot to be gained by giving. So give yourself to the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. Think of whatever you sense in the body. Think of the body as being an aspect of the breath. Don’t hold any other perceptions. See what happens. There are sensations in different parts of the body that you accepted for having to be there because you thought, “Well, this is a solid part of the body, and this is something that’s blocked here, and it’s just going to stay that way.” If you see it as solid, of course it’s going to stay that way. But what happens if you change your perception? See it as energy, energy that could move. See what that does. Try on these new perceptions. And in some cases, the blockage will still be there. In other cases, not. But you don’t know unless you’ve given it a try. So give yourself to the breath. Give your thoughts away. Give up whatever you recognize right now as greed, aversion, and delusion in homage to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. You think about all the good things that we’ve gotten from them. And where did that goodness come from? It came because they gave themselves to the Dhamma, too. So in response, you want to give yourself to the breath. Give yourself over right now. Whatever you’ve learned about what you should be doing in meditation, do it. Don’t hold anything back. Because it’s through the giving that you gain.

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