Evaluating the Breath

June 6, 2015

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and see how the breathing feels. Try to see what kind of breathing is comfortable. There are lots of ways you can do this. One is when you notice that you’re breathing in long and long, there comes a point where something feels tense as you breathe in. Notice where that sensation is in the body and see if you can relax it and continue breathing in. In other words, you stay with a long breath and learn how to relax around the process. When we talk about the breath here, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole movement of energy through the body. That allows the air to come in and go out. As you get more and more sensitive to this movement of energy, you begin to realize it’s everywhere in the body. Some places it’s more obvious than others. So in the beginning, you focus on the obvious parts. If you find that you can’t relax around the long breathing, then you can let the breathing get shorter. As you breathe in, notice at what point it starts to get uncomfortable, and so stop. Then breathe out. And then you can try the same adjustment with other ways of breathing. Faster or slower? Heavier? Lighter? Deeper? More shallow? Try to get a sense of what feels best for the body right now. All these things are what the body needs. Or you can simply pose the question in the mind each time you breathe in and breathe out, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” See if the body responds on its own. Because sometimes if you manipulate the breath too much, or if you’re awkward in manipulating it, it gets unpleasant. So this second method is basically giving you hands-off. Pose the question, “What would feel good?” and see if the body responds. It may take a while. Remember that breath is the energy of life, and so it should feel good coming in. That’s what keeps you going. All of this is called evaluation. When we meditate, sometimes we have the idea that when you meditate you’re not supposed to think, but actually you have to think your way into stillness. It’s learning how to use your thinking in a skillful way, asking the right questions, particularly questions about what feels good in the present moment and what you can do to make it feel better. This gives you a sense of how much power you have over the way you shape your experience right now. This is an important lesson in meditation. We’re not simply on the receiving end of things coming in from outside, but we have our perceptions, our ways of labeling things, and we have our ways of thinking about things that actually shape what we experience. As the Buddha pointed out, this is what makes the difference. If you can do this skillfully, there’s less suffering. If you do it unskillfully, there’s more. So how do you learn how to read your present actions? Well, start with the breath, because it’s the basis of all action. The mind is the intention, but it’s through the breath that you can get the body to move. So the breath is the closest thing to the mind that you have, that you can watch. And from the breath you can move the rest of the body. This is a good place to get a sense of what your mind is doing and what the results of its actions are right here in the present moment. And then you can learn to adjust things. Once there’s a sense of pleasure in the body, a sense of pleasure in the breath, then the next step is to say, “What are you going to do with that pleasure?” The first thing you want to make sure is that you don’t lose your focus. In other words, stay with the breathing. Don’t drop the breathing to wallow around in the pleasure. As long as you’re with the breathing, the fact that you’re focused on the breathing is what allows the pleasure to happen. It’s the cause. If you drop the cause, the results will start to fade away. So if the pleasure is there, it can do its work. But you stay with the breathing. So how do you make the most of that pleasure in relationship to the breath? We think of that comfortable breath moving through different parts of the body. You can take it section by section. Ask yourself right now, where are you focused? Where the sensation of the breathing feels good, can you expand the range of that focus? And at the same time, allow the sense of pleasure to expand as well. Here you have to be very careful. It’s a matter of allowing. You can’t force it to move. You can’t force it to expand. Tell yourself, “I’ll sit here and allow it.” Try to sense what you’re doing that might be getting in its way, the worry-holding patterns of tension that might prevent the pleasure from moving. Can you drop that and see how much it can expand? Sometimes it won’t expand at all, so you contend yourself with what you’ve got for the time being. This is an important step in the meditation. An important aspect of the meditation is learning how much you can push yourself at any one time. When you’re trying to push too hard or make things be in a certain way that they’re not ready for yet, then you learn how to back off. We live in an instant culture where we press a button on a computer and we get frustrated. It takes a couple seconds for the computer to respond. If you carry that kind of impatience into your meditation, you’re going to have trouble because meditation is a matter of maturing certain qualities of the mind, in the same way that a fruit might mature or ripen on a tree. There are ways of forcing the fruit to ripen, but the fruit doesn’t come out nearly as well as if it ripens on its own natural rate. The problem is that the mind is not like fruit, in the sense that you can’t know how much time it’s going to take for it to ripen. You have a pretty good sense of how long it’s going to take. With this, you have to basically push things a little bit and then figure out what’s working and what’s not. If you push too hard, it’s no longer comfortable. If you don’t push things enough, you just begin to stagnate. So protect what you’ve got and allow it to mature. When it seems ready to spread or do something more, okay, let it go. Let it spread. See what happens. Once there’s a sense of ease that fills the body as much as you can get it to go, then try to protect that. Again, you don’t protect it by putting an iron fence around it. You just try to maintain the steadiness of mind that got it there to begin with. As Ajaan Fura, my teacher, used to say, there are three steps to the meditation. One is learning how to do it, and two is learning how to maintain it, and three is learning how to put it to use. The maintaining takes patience, and it takes sensitivity. But it’s what makes all the difference in the world. Because once the mind has a perception it can stick with, and a sensation of breath it can stick with, then it can begin to settle down. And its tendency to want to jump off to something else can begin to relax. So your sense of awareness and the sense of the breath begin to penetrate each other. That way the concentration can deepen. And if you notice that it’s reached a deeper level, see what you can do to maintain it. You may get excited and say, “Wow, it’s getting more and more still now.” Note the fact that that moment of excitement happened, and then just let it go. Get back to the breath as quickly as you can, because that’s where all the action is. Then as things begin to settle down and there’s a sense of the awareness as being one with the breath, then you can drop any thoughts about adjusting things. Just be with this sensation. The awareness fills the body, the breath fills the body, and they feel good together. They feel like they belong to each other. You’re creating a home for the mind. As with any home, it takes a while to furnish it and get it so it feels really comfortable. It’s not just a house. It’s a home. It takes a while to get acquainted with what’s needed to get the mind to settle down, and then once it’s settled down, how you maintain it. That’s for putting it to use, that third step. You learn about that as you’re maintaining. In other words, the things you need to do in order to keep this going. It’s sometimes required that a thought comes up and says, “I’m bored,” or, “What’s that?” And you have to learn how to put that thought aside. That’s an important use for the concentration right there, learning how to recognize unskillful thoughts and realizing you don’t have to jump on every thought. You don’t have to lay claim to every thought that comes into the mind. It comes there, but you don’t let it have an impact. That’s an important skill. So it’s through the maintaining that you learn how to use this. As you try to maintain this sense of inner inhabiting the body, the breath filling the body, even when you get up and leave the meditation. It may not be as intense, but there can still be a sense that you’re inhabiting the present moment right here. You can carry that with you. It gives you a good foundation so you can observe your mind as you go through the day. This is what it’s all about. We focus on the breath so that we can observe the mind. It may seem a little indirect, but it’s like looking in a mirror. You can’t look directly at your own face. You have to look in a mirror to see your face. Well, it’s the same with the breath, especially when you get started. As you work with the breath, you begin to know your mind. And you begin to notice when it’s thinking in ways that are not skillful, that are not helpful. And you realize you don’t have to go with it. You’ve got something better right here with the breath, so you stay here. This gives you some distance from the things that would otherwise suck you in and then spit you out. In other words, the worlds of the mind that look attractive to begin with, but then as you inhabit them for a while, you begin to realize that this is really not helpful. So you have a different alternative. You don’t have to get sucked into those worlds. You can stand outside of them. You can watch them and see them come, see them go. And you can get more particular about which ones you want to go with. Meditation is not a skill only in learning how not to think, but it’s also a skill in learning how to think, when the appropriate time is to think, and how to conserve your energy. So you’re not spending your time thinking about things that are totally useless. You think about things that are useful, and then you drop everything else. Because the mind has a chance to rest, then what it is thinking about useful things, it can think more effectively. The standard image is of a knife. You sharpen the knife and try not to use it too much. Use it just when you really have to. When you don’t have to use it, then you sharpen it again, letting the mind stay still and think about the breath. That’s sharpening the knife. And so you have it ready at hand when you really do need to think about things. So think of the meditation as a skill in learning how to manage your own mind. How to get to know your own mind so you can manage it well.

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