An Alternative Source of Food

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Focus your attention on the breath. Notice when it’s coming in. Notice when it’s going out. All the way in, all the way out. And in the moments between the ins and the outs, try to make your awareness as continuous as possible. When you breathe in, notice where you feel the breath. It may not be in the places you expect. Because when we talk about breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole flow of energy in the body that brings the air in and lets it go out. And that you can feel almost anywhere. You can feel it in the shoulders, in the chest, in the abdomen, sometimes in your head, even in your arms, your hands, your legs, your feet. There’s a flow of energy that goes through the nerves, that goes through the blood vessels. Wherever it’s most prominent right now, focus your attention there and see how long you can stay there. Make it a game. If you get too grim about the whole thing, it makes it unpleasant. If you find that you can stay with the breath for five in-and-out breaths and then wander away, then when you reestablish your awareness, say, “Okay, let’s this time see if we can stay for ten.” Once you’ve got ten, then try for fifteen, twenty. An important part of the meditation is that you find it enjoyable. So also try to make the breath comfortable. Usually we start with some deep, long breathing. See if that feels good. And if it does, you keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change the rhythm. Make the breath heavier, lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. Or you can try in-long and out-short, or in-short and out-long. If you’re feeling tired, it’s good to have some good heavy in-breathing and quick out-breathing. If you’re feeling tense, that’s the other way around. Do short in-breathing or longer out-breathing. And as you get more interested in the breath, you begin to realize that the way you breathe is going to have an impact on how you feel the body right now and also the mood of the mind. So you’re not just here counting breaths; you’re also noticing this process of the breath energy in the body and how it has an impact on the body, how it has an impact on the mind, and also the way you think about things, how that has an impact on the breath. There’s this free aspect of your experience of having a body that you can put to good use. You can learn to explore it. Notice that when you breathe in, this energy that flows through the nerves, if you can sense it, which direction is it flowing in? Does it seem helpful? Sometimes if it’s flowing up too much, it gives you headaches, makes you tense. So think of it flowing down. Or flowing down too much makes you tired and drowsy? Think of it flowing up. If you tend to have a pain in one side of the body, focus on the breath energy. If there’s a pain in the opposite side, focus on your back. Think of the breath coming in from the back. If there’s a pain in your left side, focus on your right side. In other words, focus on the positive energies in the body and strengthen them. This helps create a more solid foundation here in the present moment. When the Buddha gave instructions to his son, how to do breath meditation, he started out first with a comment on how to make the mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react. Make your mind like fire. The fire is used to burn disgusting things, but the fire doesn’t get disgusted by those things. Make it like water. Water washes disgusting things away. Make it like wind. Wind blows disgusting things around, but neither of them gets upset. This is a quality of mind you’ve got to develop as you meditate. Otherwise you won’t see things clearly. You run into something you don’t like and you run away. You have no chance to investigate it. But if you remind yourself, even though the pains or unpleasant things may be there, they don’t have to push you off. Make up your mind that you’re going to stay here and don’t let anything push you off. Good, bad, indifferent. You want to stay right here with the breath so you can see it clearly. Then you begin to realize there is a part of the mind that can take anything. Especially if you’re in the West, this is a quality of mind that we haven’t developed very much. There’s a famous saint, John, in Thailand, who was teaching a lot of Westerners and then got sick. Most of them came away with the idea that the teaching was all about equanimity and patience. He didn’t have a chance to teach them further than that. But you can understand why he emphasized that, because Westerners have very little equanimity and very little patience. As a result, we see things in little bits and snatches. So when things aren’t going well with the body, don’t get upset. Just remind yourself you’ve got the breath. You can work with the breath. Patience doesn’t mean you just sit there with whatever’s coming up. It means that you realize that you have some tools. And the tools will take a while to work, but you’re not totally defenseless in the face of whatever comes up. If you find that things you can’t change, okay, you have some equanimity around those. Focus on the things you can. And if the whole body were miserable, you’d die. There have got to be some parts of the body that are comfortable. The same with the mind. There have got to be some parts of the mind that are not affected by greed, aversion, sadness, whatever. They can just watch these things and not get involved. Those are the parts of the mind you want to encourage. Because as you develop more of these qualities as you meditate, you can also bring those same qualities to the rest of your life, which, again, allows you to see things more clearly and not be so reactive. If you’re going to respond to a situation, it is that. It’s a response, not a reaction. You’ve figured out the proper way to respond. You’ve watched it for a while, figured out what’s going on. And you don’t just trust your first impulses. This way you can deal with situations in life with a lot more strength. Because you’ve created a sense of well-being inside that can be your foundation as you go into the world. Because what does the world have? It has material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise from other people, criticism from other people, pleasures and pains. And that’s pretty much it. But notice these things all come in pairs. Wherever there’s gain, there’s going to be loss. Where there’s something pleasant, there’s going to be something painful. We tend to want the pleasure and not want the pain. But these things have to come together. It’s like a snake. A snake has teeth on one end and has a tail on the other. The tail doesn’t bite. But if you grab hold of the tail, the other end is going to come around and bite you. So if you can see pleasures and pains simply as things there in the world, then you can live in the world and not suffer from the world. But to do that, you need an alternative place to put your awareness. That’s why we work with the breath. Because this is your place. The world may be spinning around, but you can stay right here in the middle and not spin with it. So take some time to work with the breath. Get a sense of what you can do with the breath, what skills you need to develop, what skills you haven’t quite developed yet, where you can make things better, which parts of the body or which parts of the breath you have to leave alone for a while. This becomes your territory. This becomes your strength. The Buddhist analogy compares concentration to food. We tend to feed on things outside. We feed on gain. We feed on status. We feed on praise. We feed on pleasures. But as it turns out, sometimes we think we’re feeding on gain and it turns into loss. And then we find ourselves feeding on loss. Or feeding on loss of status. Feeding on criticism. From other people feeding on pains. And of course, it’s going to be bad for our digestion. Give the mind this alternative source of food inside, a sense of well-being that comes with working with the breath, understanding the energies in the body, what their potentials are. That way you can live in the world and not suffer from the world, because you don’t take the world on. When you don’t take it on, then when gain comes, you learn how to use the gain in a way that really is helpful for yourself and other people. You use your status in ways that are helpful for yourself. In other words, you use it as an opportunity to do good while you have it, realizing that someday it’s going to go. So you don’t get carried away with all the other things that come along with the status. You never know when you’ve got some gain on your side and other people are coming. What are they coming for? It’s when you lose those things, the people who still hang around. Those are your true friends. As for the other people, they’ll leave. And if you’ve been feeding on that, you’re going to suffer. But if you don’t feed on it, you’re going to suffer. If you don’t feed on it, then you’re in a much better position. The same with praise and criticism. We all want to hear praise. But many times criticism is actually better for us. It gives us a sense of the things that we need to develop. When people come and criticize us for things that we haven’t done, then we know something about that other person. These are all good lessons to learn. They’re lessons to learn both from the things we like and the things we don’t like. But if all we want to do is just feed off the things we like, then we’re not going to learn those lessons. We’ve got to give the mind this alternative source of food. We all have this potential here within us to work with the energies in the body. It just requires some skill. And I bet you take some time and you apply some patience to learn these skills. Then you find that you’ve got some support inside. You’ve got a source of strength inside that you can take with you wherever you go.

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