Beginning Breath Meditation

July 26, 2015

First, get your body in position. Sit up straight, your hands in your lap, face forward, close your eyes. Now get your mind in position. This is a little bit more complex. First, make sure that you’re in a good mood to meditate. Remind yourself that this is a noble activity, training your mind, looking for happiness through training the mind. It’s rare to have the opportunity to have some quiet time like this. Think thoughts of goodwill for yourself. Tell yourself, “May I be happy, truly happy.” That’s something special. Happiness is something that lasts. It doesn’t turn on you. It doesn’t cause any harm to you or anyone else. For that, you have to look inside and spread thoughts of goodwill to the people around you. Because their true happiness depends on their looking inside, too. You can remind yourself that when you look for happiness in this way, it’s not a selfish activity, because your true happiness doesn’t harm anyone else. It doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. This is what makes this rare. Because all too often in the world, the way we find pleasure, we benefit, but somebody else has to lose. Or they benefit, and we have to lose. But when we look inside in this way, nobody loses. Everybody benefits. So with those thoughts in mind, then you focus on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. It can be at the nose, in the middle of the chest, in the stomach, or it can be anywhere else in the body. Wherever the breath is most obvious, put your attention there. Watch it as you breathe in and breathe out to see if that spot can stay comfortable all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. There are two ways of doing this when you’re dealing with long breathing. One is if you notice that you begin to get a little tense as the breath gets longer. Notice where the tension is and see if you can relax it. If that doesn’t work, then you can try shorter breathing. In-long, out-short, or in-short, out-long, or in-short, out-short. Deep, shallow, heavy, light. You can play with the breath to see what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. If your mind wanders off, just drop that thought, whatever it was, and come right back. If it wanders off again, drop that thought and come back. Don’t get discouraged. Each time you come back, reward yourself with an especially comfortable breath. Something that feels really gratifying, because that way the mind will be more and more likely to want to come back. If there are any pains in the body, you can just let them go for the time being. Focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. Trying to maintain that sense of comfort is like holding a bowl full of water in your hands. You have to be very careful. If the water is filled to the brim, you have to be very careful that it doesn’t spill. When you find that you can maintain it, then see if you can spread that sense of ease through different parts of the body. You can take a survey and go through the body section by section. You can start at the navel, go up the front of the body, over the head, and down the back. Out through the arms, out through the legs. See if you can keep that sense of balanced ease spreading through the body. If there are places that are blocked, see if you can imagine the energy going right through them or around them. Go through the body as many times as you like. If you want to settle down, find one spot that feels especially comfortable. Keep your attention there and see if you can make your attention spread from that spot to fill the whole body. So you’re aware of the whole body, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. As for any thoughts or any noises, just think of them going right through, like the screen on a window. The breeze goes through the screen. The screen itself is not affected. It doesn’t try to catch anything. It doesn’t put up any resistance. But it stays in place. In the same way, try to keep your awareness right here with the breath. Now, to do this requires four qualities. One is the desire to do it. You want the mind to settle down. And that desire is okay. Sometimes we think the Buddha says desire is always the cause for suffering, but that’s not the case. There are desires that are causing suffering, as he said, when we’re a slave to craving. And then there are desires that want to get us on the path, that want us to do something skillfully. That’s part of right effort. That’s what gives you the motivation to do it. Develop the second factor, which is persistence. You stick with it. You don’t get discouraged. You just keep on going. If you fall off the breath, pick yourself up, come right back. And it’s always there. It’s there continually. You want to make your awareness there as continual as you can. Then there’s interest or intent. You really want to do this well. And you take an interest in what you’re doing. This is one of the reasons why it’s good to experiment with the breath. Because you begin to see that different ways of breathing are going to have a different impact on the body, a different impact on the mind. And you begin to realize that you’ve got a resource right here that you haven’t used fully. So here’s your chance to get to know what different ways of breathing can do, and different ways of thinking about the breath. If you think of the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the lungs, it’s somewhat restrictive, because you’ve just got those two little holes in your nose that it can come through. But if you think of the breath as the energy that suffuses the body as you breathe in and breathe out, that can come in and out of the body anywhere, through all the pores, like the pores of a sponge. When you think about the breath in that way, the breath becomes a different kind of breath. It becomes a different kind of experience. And it becomes a lot more interesting. If you have tightness or tension in any part of the body, you can think of the breath going right through it and dissolving it away. If your energy level is down, you can breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you’re feeling too tight and tense, you can breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. And finally, there’s using your powers of analysis. If things are not going well with the breath or not going well with the mind, what can you change? You can change the point where you’re focused. You can change the way you breathe. You can ask yourself if your attitude is right. If your mind needs a little bit more energy, what uplifts it? If it’s a little bit too scattered, what’s going to give it some ballast so it stays in place? And when things aren’t going well, you want to make sure you can maintain this. All too often, when the mind finally does settle down, there’s immediately the question, “Well, what’s next?” Well, this is what’s next. You want to learn how to maintain this, have a sense of letting the mind rest from all of its activity. Don’t be pushing it too hard. Give your mind a space. Give yourself, in the present moment, some space. Because when you have a space like this, the body gets healed, the mind gets healed. And when you do have to think, your mind is in a much better position to think clearly, because it’s well-rested. And it’s strengthened. All kinds of good qualities get strengthened in this practice. Your mindfulness, in other words, your ability to keep something in mind. As you keep reminding yourself, “Stay with the breath, stay with the breath,” that gets strengthened. Your alertness, your ability to notice what’s actually going on inside your body, inside your mind, that gets strengthened as well. You see what you’re doing, you see the results that you’re getting from what you’re doing. And the third quality is ardency, which is directly connected to mindfulness. Directly connected to persistence or your energy. In other words, you want to do this well. If you see you’re getting good results from the breath, okay, maintain it. If you’re not getting good results, you ask yourself, “What can I do to change?” If the mind wanders off, you catch it as quickly as you can and then bring it back. You don’t have to pull it back. Usually, as soon as you drop a distracting thought, you’re back here with the breath. This is home base. When you’re here, you try to be as sensitive as possible. The more sensitive you are to even the slightest disturbance in the breath, and your ability to smooth that out, the more rewarding, the more satisfying it’s going to be to stay here. Because we are developing a sense of pleasure here. Some people are afraid of getting attached to the pleasure of concentration, but it’s a much better attachment than our usual attachments. You want to like the pleasure of concentration, because then it helps give you a better perspective on the other pleasures of the world. You’re more willing to see that a lot of them have their drawbacks. A lot of them create harm for yourself, harm for other people. If you had no other choices, you’d go for them. But now you have a better choice, a better place to stay, a better way to give a sense of well-being to the body and the mind. That right there gives you a much better opportunity to find a genuine happiness, because you’re not running after little bits and pieces of pleasure here and there. You’ve got something more solid right here, something less harmful. Even though this is not the goal of the meditation, this is simply a step in the meditation, getting the mind to settle down like this. Still, it’s a very important step. Then it changes the balance of power in the mind. You become more in charge. That phrase we had in the chant just now, “being a slave to craving,” you begin to rise above that. You give yourself some freedom. So you’ve got an hour to develop this skill. Try to make the most of it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2015/150726_Beginning_Breath_Meditation.mp3>