Techniques & Values

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When you focus on the breath, there are two types of things you have to keep in mind. The first has to do with the techniques, the steps and the practice, dealing with where you focus, how you focus, how you breathe, what you do when a sense of ease comes up, what you do when a sense of energy comes up. It’s good to keep in mind the Buddhist teachings on right concentration. John Lee had the insight that when the Buddha talks about the different factors of jhana, or right concentration, the first level, one side is causes and the other side is results. The causes are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. What this means is that you direct your thoughts to the breath, and then you evaluate things. You evaluate the breath, you evaluate the way you’re focused, you evaluate how well your mind is settling in, and you make adjustments. For instance, if you find that your mind is focusing on the nose, which gives you a headache, we’ll focus lower down, say at the tip of the sternum or in the stomach. If you find that focusing down in the lower part of the body makes you sleepy, we’ll bring the focus back up. And as for the breath, you can experiment with different ways of breathing. You can either consciously go through the different types and the different ways you can combine them—long, short, shallow, deep, heavy, light, fast, slow. Or you can simply pose the question in mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” and see how the body responds. “What kind of breathing would feel especially good now?” Give it permission to breathe in a way that feels really, really good. Because the breath is the energy of life. And we’re talking about breath here. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the energy flow through the nerves, through the blood vessels. So you can think about how that feels anywhere in the body. How are your shoulders right now? Could they use a little extra breath energy? How about your neck? How about your back, your legs, your feet, your hands, your arms? When the breath does feel good, what do you do then? You’ve got to watch out for the tendency the mind has, when things get comfortable inside, to drift off. So give the mind work to do with the breath. Think of that comfortable energy spreading out to different parts of the body that may not be quite so comfortable. Let everybody get nourished. John Lee recommends going down the spine, down the legs, starting at a point right at the breastbone and going down through your stomach and intestines, down the shoulders or the arms. There are lots of ways you can move the breath energy around or think of it moving around. Don’t push it too much, don’t force it too much, or else you’ll get a headache. And then just try to stay with the breath as your one preoccupation. You don’t have to think about anything else right now. Those are the causes of right concentration. You’re directing a thought to the breath, you’re evaluating it, and you make it one, the one object of the mind, both in the sense that it’s the only object you’re focused on and also in the sense that you begin to realize that it’s breath all around you in the body. When you’re focused on the body, you can think of it as being all breath. Those are the causes. The results, when they come, are one. Refreshment or rapture, the Pali word bhitti, can mean either of those. It can mean a sense of fullness, a sense of energy. Sometimes your hair stands on end. Or there’s a tingling sensation in different parts of the body. You feel like a wave is coming over you. Or simply that your sense of the body starts getting distorted. It feels very large or very small. And then there’s a sense of ease. You don’t focus on these. These are the results. People talk about getting attached to the pleasure of concentration. The bad way of getting attached is to just leave the breath and go jumping into the pillow of the ease and the rapture. And you find out that it’s actually a cloud. You jump onto it and you go right through. In other words, you lose your concentration. You may be drifting around peacefully, but without any focus. That kind of concentration doesn’t qualify as right. So you focus on the causes and let the results take care of themselves. Now, the right way to be attached to comfort and the concentration is to see how you can breathe to maximize the comfort. It feels really good sitting here doing nothing but breathing. There’ll come a point where you don’t have to do any more evaluation. You can just allow yourself to stay with that sense of well-being as you breathe in and breathe out. The breath will have a tendency to get more refined as you’re using less oxygen because you’re thinking less. This is where the sense of values comes in, because the mind can very quickly say, “This is not interesting. What’s next?” You begin to realize the mind is here looking for entertainment. There was the entertainment of getting the mind to settle down, but now it’s there. You want the next stage, and you want it fast. Or you may think, “This is kind of dumb just sitting here not thinking.” Especially here in the West, we have a tendency to want to figure things out. Once we’ve figured out how to get the mind to settle down, what’s next? But you have to remind yourself that getting the mind to stay here is a skill, too. That questioning, “What’s next?” or “I’m bored,” or “I want to move on to something else,” those are the things you have to battle with. You can’t believe those. Those are based on a set of values that you’re going to have to question. When the thought “I’m bored” comes up, you can ask yourself, “Who’s bored?” What’s the thought that “This is dumb” comes up? What’s dumb about mastering a skill? Learning how to sidestep these things takes a lot of intelligence, but it’s a different kind of intelligence from what we’re used to. The question, “Why am I sitting here doing what other people are telling me to do?” Nobody’s forcing you. Human beings learn skills from one another. The internet seems to be making us think that we can learn skills straight from the computer and that the human interaction or the human factor is less and less necessary. But that’s not the case, especially with a skill like this. If you’re constantly dependent on somebody in the computer to tell you, you’re not going to develop your own discernment. The instructions are here not to force anybody to do anything, but to open some possibilities you might not have thought of before. Possibilities in how the mind can function better, how the mind can learn to look after itself better. Now it can solve that big problem. The fact that we want happiness, however we may define it, but we end up doing a lot of things that destroy happiness. It makes no sense, and yet we do it. There are people who come before us who’ve learned how not to do it, how to stop causing unnecessary suffering. So you want to learn from them. Again, they’re not forcing it on you, but here it is. These are skills that were mastered many thousands of years ago. Here’s your chance to learn how to do them. So when other thoughts come up that are going to pull you away from the concentration, you have to learn how to question them. There’s a value in learning this skill. There’s a value in having a mind that’s really still. How else are you going to see yourself in action? How else are you going to learn how to step out of your comfort zone? Step out of your thoughts. The thoughts have been running your life. The extent to which other people try to run your life is nothing compared to the way random thoughts come in and run your life. The way you use thoughts to run your life in ways that you don’t fully understand. Here you are trying to learn how to understand what’s going on. So these are the skills. You learn to step back, question your thinking processes, and develop a greater sense of being at home with a still mind. Some people find it scary. They live and they identify themselves with a lot of activity going on inside. They’re slaves to that activity. If you want to get out of your slavery, you have to learn how to step out. So have some confidence in a still mind. It’s not still in the sense of being blank and dumb. It’s still in the sense of being very, very clear, like water that’s grown still. You can see your reflections. You can see what’s in the water clearly. Because we’re still but alert at the same time. And it’s that combination of stillness and alertness that allows you to see things you never saw before, and to see them from the beginning to the end. It’s not just a matter of glimpsing something for a moment. You want to see cause and effect. And that requires that you look for a long time. Adjust things a little bit, then look again. Adjust them some more, look again. It’s only then that things will become clear.

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