Why Meditate

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We’ve come to train the mind to solve one of the big problems in life, which is that we all want happiness, we all want well-being, and everything we do is for the sake of well-being. Yet the results aren’t always what we want. As the Buddha said, our desire for happiness. There’s nothing wrong with that. The problem is that we act out of ignorance. We don’t know what we’re doing. We think we’re doing things that are going to lead to happiness, but then we often find that the results are not what we thought they’d be. So a solution is to bring more knowledge to what we’re doing, bring more awareness to what we’re doing. And since we’re doing it in the present moment, this is a place where we have to train the mind, teach the mind how to stay here so you can see all the way from the cause, i.e., your intention to act, to the result of the action. All these things will appear right here. Our problem is that we’re often not here. We’re someplace else, sometimes in the past, sometimes in the future. Sometimes we learn some lessons, but then we forget them. We’ve noticed, “Okay, this is connected to that. If you act in this way, it’s going to cause suffering.” But then we forget. We assume that it’s the way things have to be. So what we’re doing as we come here to meditate is to train the mind to realize that it doesn’t have to be that way. But it requires that we gain more knowledge into what we’re doing and the results of what we’re doing. So we bring the mind to the present moment and we focus on the breath, because the breath on the one hand is the basis of all our actions. If we didn’t have the breath coming in and going out, we wouldn’t be able to act at all and we’d be dead. The breath is where the body and the mind meet. If you’re going to use the body to do something, the order has to come from the mind through the breath into the rest of the body. At the same time, the breath is something that’s always in the present moment. You can’t watch a past breath. You can’t watch a future breath. It’s just this breath right here, right here in the present moment. So as long as you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present. You’re in a good place to watch the mind, watch its actions. To stay here, it requires that you have a sense of ease with the breath and a sense of interest in the breath. To get interested in the breath, you remind yourself, “This is how we live. Without the breath, we die.” And if the breath can flow naturally, and here the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it’s this flow of energy that allows the air to come in, allows it to go out. And that’s connected with all the other flows of energy in the body, all of which are called breath. So the sense of blood moving through the vessels, the sense of energy moving down through the nerves, that all counts as breath as well. And we want to make use of all these levels of the breath. But the in-and-out breath is the most convenient. It’s the easiest in the beginning stages. So you want to focus on that first. The Buddha constantly recommends that you start with three or seven long in-and-out breaths. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If you have trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word. A traditional one is bhutto. Bhutto means “awake.” It’s one of the qualities we’re trying to develop in the mind. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. But if it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Short out long or in long out short. Fast, slow, heavy, light. Whatever kind of breathing feels good for the body right now, explore that and use that to make yourself interested in what’s going on. Because if the breath feels good in the different parts of the body, it’s going to be good for all those parts of the body. The blood flow improves, the flow of energy improves. This is good for all the organs of the body. So you can make a survey of the different parts of the body as you breathe in, breathe out. If there’s any sense of tension or tightness that seems to block the flow of energy, allow it to relax. Try to make a systematic survey again and again as you hit all the different spots in the body. You get more familiar with how the breath energy feels in the different parts of the body. Because once you get a sense that the in-and-out breath feels good, then you want to have that sense of good breath flow all over the body. So it feels like the whole body’s breathing in, the whole body’s breathing out. The sense of ease, the sense of well-being that comes this way is different from the pleasures that we get in the world outside. It’s more reliable, it has fewer drawbacks. It doesn’t place any burdens on anybody at all. There’s nothing you have to ask from anybody else. Your sense of the body as you feel from within, that’s your territory. So you want to explore this territory. Make it a good place to stay. Because while you’re here, you get to watch the movements of the mind. You can see when something comes up in the mind, whether it’s going to be skillful or unskillful. In other words, if it’s skillful, that means it’s going to lead to your happiness and the happiness of people around you. If it’s unskillful, it’s going to lead to somebody’s suffering, somebody’s harm. If you’re operating for a sense of well-being that comes with being with a breath, then it’s a lot easier to resist the unskillful things and to find the energy to do with the things that are more skillful but may be hard, or may go against the grain. When you feed the mind with a breath like this, it’s like feeding it good food. And the hunger it has for its old unskillful habits gets less and less, it weakens and weakens. So allow the breath to be comfortable and then think of that sense of comfort spreading through the body. You may want to go through the body section by section first, but then ultimately you want to get so you can be aware of the whole body all at once, from the head down to the toes, from the toes up to the head, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Put aside all your other cares of the world outside. You’re working on your own inner territory right now. It’s because we’re ignorant of this area. That’s why our actions can lead to suffering. If you know this area well, with a sense of well-being, a sense of strength that comes from staying with the breath, then you’re much less likely to do things that’ll lead to suffering or harm. You’re more likely to see what needs to be done to lead to a genuine happiness, and you’ve got the strength and the willingness to do it. This is why we train the mind. Because the mind is not just a passive recipient of things coming in. It’s also active as it goes out, looking for happiness, looking for a sense of nourishment. As long as it’s going out, it’s trying to shape things the way it wants. We want to be sensitive to how we’re shaping things. We want to be aware that we’re already shaping our experience, so we want to learn how to shape it well. Ultimately, we’re trying to get happiness that doesn’t have to be shaped by anything. But to get there, you have to shape your experience well. The breath is a good place to start. You realize that you can bring a comfortable breath into any situation, and it totally doesn’t matter whether you’re going to suffer from that situation or you’re not going to suffer. You’ve got the choice because you’re bringing a new energy in. You’re coming in with a sense of energy, a sense of refreshment from the breath. That right there changes a lot of things in life. As the Buddha said, it’s what we bring to our experience that causes suffering, and we’re ignorant of what we’re bringing, which is why it causes suffering. That doesn’t mean we’re not going to bring anything. First, we bring good things with knowledge, with awareness. As I said, the breath is a good place to start because it has a huge impact on how your body feels from within. It has a huge impact on the mind as it’s trying to stay in the present moment. It brings them all together in a good way. So for the time being, this is all you have to be concerned about. Years ago, a woman came to stay at Wat Dhammaset. She was going to stay for two weeks to practice. After the first day, she came to say goodbye to a jhana-fung. She had to go home, she said. He asked her why. She said, “Well, she was worried about the people at home. How were they going to get along? Who was going to fix their food? Who was going to wash their clothes? How would they get along without her?” He said, “Well, assume that you’ve died. They’d have to get along. They’d have to get by on their own.” So if you find your thoughts wandering off to responsibilities at home or at work, just tell yourself, “Well, pretend that you’ve died. I’ll just have to do without you.” In the meantime, you have the opportunity here to work on the big problem in your life, which is the way that you cause suffering for yourself and for others. You can do this even without intending to. Bring more knowledge to this place here in the present moment where the mind and the body meet at the breath. That’ll enable you to see a lot of things you never saw before. Fix problems you never knew you had. Or fix the problems you knew you had, but you didn’t know how to go about it. Fix them. Now you’ve got a basis. You’re setting things right.

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