Breathe while You Work

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When we meditate, we’re settling in with the breath. That corresponds to a Pali term, vijanadhamma, which means a dwelling quality. It’s the place where your mind dwells, hangs out, remains. And Ajahn Lee makes a nice distinction. He says, “Some meditation topics can be vijanadhamma, places where you really do remain, and others are places where you go foraging and go jhanadhamma,” he calls them. The breath, he says, is your dwelling. You can stay with the breath. It’s the safest of all the meditation topics. Other topics can be more likely to give rise to visions that sometimes can disturb you, like contemplation of the body, goodwill. It’s not disturbing, necessarily, but when you start thinking about all the people out there who are suffering, it’s hard to maintain your equanimity right now. So the breath is a safe place to stay. Settle in here. Get used to being here. Get to know the breath really well. And then it’s when you’re moving into a house to make it your home. Learn to make adjustments. What kind of breathing do you like? There’s nobody forcing you to breathe in any particular way. There’s no chart at the beginning of the room saying you have to breathe this way and then that way. You breathe any way you like, but make it something you really like. And try to become more discerned, become a connoisseur of your breath. What kind of breathing is good and goes well with the body when it’s healthy? What kind of breathing goes well with the body when it’s not healthy? What kind of breathing is good when you’re tired or when you’re overly excited, when you’re wired? The more you hang out with the breath, the more you begin to realize it does have these variations and you can make use of them. That’s why you turn your house of the breath into a home. And it’s a mobile home. You can take it with you. As you get up from the meditation, the breath is still there. You walk around, the breath is still there. You do your chores during the day, the breath is still there. Try to make that your dwelling place. And John Lee’s distinction is also useful when you think about the work we do around the house. We don’t have meditators here doing nothing but meditating and then a staff to support them. We meditate and we look after the place. So this means that you have to have the right attitude to the work outside. Think of that, again, as a place you go foraging. It’s not your main preoccupation, it’s not your main interest. The breath should be your main interest as you’re working, as you’re walking around, whatever you’re doing. The breath is there. Make that your dwelling place. In Thailand, they talk about monks who make something else their dwelling place. There was a monk we had in Wat Asokanam whose dwelling place was the invitations for meals. He cornered the job to decide who was going to go where for which meal. It became pretty obvious after a while that he was getting all the best invitations. Nobody else was really concerned, because, after all, that’s why we went there. But his meditation started going down, down, down, and he ended up disrobing. That’s what tends to happen when things outside become your dwelling place. They pull you away from the practice. So make sure the breath is your dwelling place. The nice thing about being a monastery is that the bottom line here is not the profits or not the money we’re getting. The bottom line is the fact that we’re here. The whole purpose of the place is for people to train their minds. There are emergencies. Things happen when we need extra manpower and womanpower. After a storm comes through, it’s good to have everybody out helping to clean up. There are other times when there are large projects that need to be done, and they need to be done quickly. But even then, you can still stay with your breath. When you’re building the jetty in Wat Tamasatit, John Fung had some students who were engineers, and they fixed up a big sign, “Buddho,” in lights. They’d go, “Buddho, Buddho,” to remind everybody to stay with their breath as they were shoveling sand, shoveling gravel, pouring cement, doing all the work that needed to be done. We’d have these all-night cement pourings. People were commenting how they were amazed at how long they could stay with a job like that when they were focused with their breath. One of the monks who was involved with the project came from another monastery, and he asked some of the people to come and help out with a building project at his monastery. It was not a meditation monastery, and everybody came back and they said they’d been worn out after the first hour. They’d forgotten to meditate, forgot to stay with their breath. So the breath gives you strength. It keeps you centered. When we’re working, there’s not that much the mind has to do. You figure out the job, and then you just do it. A lot of the thinking that goes on while you’re working, in normal cases, has nothing to do with the work. So it’s not the case that your focusing on the breath is going to get in the way of getting your job done. It actually keeps you more focused, uses up less energy, and it’s good practice for when you have to leave the monastery. It’s about this ability to stay centered inside. If we’re a meditation center where people do nothing but meditate all day, what usually happens is that when you leave the meditation, you leave the center. There’s a period of disorientation. The skills you learn to meditate all day and do nothing else are hard to transfer into daily life. But if you’ve been working at meditating while you’re working, you’re going to be making sure that your mind stays focused as you do other things throughout the day. Then, when you’re in a situation where the bottom line is not the training of the mind, somebody else’s bottom line is something else, you can maintain your bottom line. Because after all, this is your life. John Ferg used to say, “Nobody hired you to be born. You came here of your own free will. So it’s up to you to decide what you want to do with your life.” So you can decide. You want to train your mind and make that your top priority. So even when there are emergencies, there are other things that push you in terms of the work that needs to be done. These can happen all the time. You’ve still got your center, you’ve still got your main purpose, at least in the back of your mind and at the foundation of your actions. After all, the breath is the foundation of everything the body does. Make sure you’re staying with the foundation. Then when it happens that there are emergencies, you’re ready for them and you’re not going to get knocked over by them. John Ferg tells of how he used to be able to avoid a lot of the construction projects at the monasteries until they had that celebration of 25 centuries of Buddhism at Watasokanam, which was a huge project. And John Lee turned to him one time and said, “If you don’t help me, I’m going to die.” So John picked up his hammer and started working on the construction of places to lay people to stay. He found that, yes, he could meditate while he was swinging the hammer and working on the construction. And the fact that he had that background in staying with the breath gave him the stamina he needed. I saw a picture of him taken at that time. He was extremely thin. He had kidney problems. After the whole thing was over, he had to go in for an operation. But during the construction, he found that he had stamina. He didn’t know where it came from. Well, it came from the breath. It came from the ability to stay centered as you’re building on the breath to do other things. So make sure that the breath is your dwelling place, and the other activities around the monastery are the places where you go foraging. After all, we are here to develop all of our perfections. And there are a lot of the perfections that can be developed as we do the work. Endurance, discernment, determination—these are all good qualities for the mind. Patience, effort—these are the less glamorous of the perfections, but they’re also the most good. So as you dwell with the breath, make sure that you do some foraging, just in keeping up the pace, helping everything go as smoothly as possible. But never forget that this is your real home.

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