The Language of the Breath

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Meditating is like learning a new language. You start out learning new vocabulary, new grammar rules. In other words, instead of thinking about anything you want to think about, you’re going to think about one thing. And all your thoughts are going to be directed to thinking about one thing. In other words, you’ve got two layers here. The thoughts concerned with the breath, and then the thoughts watching over the mind and directing it back to the breath whenever it’s wandering off. At the beginning, there’s the novelty. It’s a new way of talking to yourself. Then, as with every language, you have to learn how to spend a lot of time talking to yourself. Otherwise, the new things you’ve picked up get dropped pretty quickly. And this is where you have to have patience, because it’s all too easy to talk to yourself in your old language, your ordinary ways of thinking, your ordinary ways of allowing greed to come in, or anger to come in, or delusion to come in. It’s so easy to slip back into your old language. So you have to keep forcing yourself. There’s a new language here. And with time, you get more fluent at it. But particularly when you begin to see that you can actually use the new language for your own purposes. It’s not just learning about other people’s ways of doing things or other people’s ways of thinking. You want to make it your way of thinking. And the way you do that is in two ways. One is to see that there are problems in the body and problems in the mind that the breath is really good for. I noticed with the John Fung students that after he died, a lot of them started drifting away from the meditation. But the ones who really stuck with it were the ones who had chronic diseases. There was an ailment someplace in the body, and they had found that the breath was really useful in dealing with that ailment. It might be old pains or it might be a specific disease that required that they needed to use the breath, work with the breath energy in the body, so they could maintain themselves. Maintain some strength in the face of the disease. There was one woman in particular, I remember. She had cancer, and she had cancer in so many parts of her body. It would flare up here, and the doctors would deal with it there, and then it would spread to some other spot. I don’t know how many of her organs she had removed. I visited her there one time after she’d had a kidney removed. She was sitting up in bed and looking very bright. I asked her if there was any pain. She said, “Yes, there was pain all the time.” But she didn’t let her mind go there, she said. And the strength of her concentration, the strength of her meditation, were obvious simply in the fact that she seemed so bright and cheerful, and so much stronger than most other people you’d see who’d had a kidney removed. So when you can see that working with the breath is really helpful with a problem that you’ve got, you’re beginning to realize that this new language is not just a strange set of language games or word games. It’s actually a useful tool. As is the case with so many languages, the language of meditation, the language of the breath, enables you to say things and express things and see things and learn things that you wouldn’t otherwise with just your old language. That’s when it gets really good. You’ve got a new set of tools here that you can actually use for your own purposes, and your sense of your purposes begins to expand, begins to grow. You find that situations that used to defeat you don’t defeat you anymore. Or situations where you had no idea what to do, you can begin to see what you could do. You’ve got a new vocabulary. Part of the new vocabulary is learning about the different elements of the body. We don’t usually think about them. When we talk about elements of the body, we think about oxygen and nitrogen. But the Buddha’s elements are different. They’re elementary properties of earth, water, wind, fire. Then you begin to sense that these are not just medieval ways of thinking, but there’s actually a very immediate, visceral way that you relate to your body. This is how you know the body from the inside. There’s warmth. But there’s also coolness. That’s heat and water, and the sense of solidity and the sense of energy. Earth, wind, or breath. When the body’s out of whack, you begin to realize, “Okay, one of these elements is out of whack.” And you can use the breath, to some extent at least, to compensate. So when things are feeling too heavy in the body, you breathe in a way that’s lighter. When things are feeling uplifting, more energetic. When you’re too cold, you breathe in a way that’s warm. When you’re too hot, breathe in a way that’s cool. There are all kinds of things you can do with this new language that you couldn’t do with your old language. And as you develop these new skills, this is where it gets really good. You become a new person. I remember a friend of mine who was going to go to Korea. This was after I’d come back from Thailand. She was going to go to Korea on the same program that had sent me to Thailand. We were talking one day about how long it takes to get fluent in a new language. And her concern was that she wouldn’t be able to express herself, her real feelings, in Korean for a long time. And I told her, “Don’t worry. You’re going to become a new person in Korean. Your personality in Korean is going to be different from your personality in English. And it’s not a loss. It’s an expansion.” And the same goes with the breath. You learn new ways of thinking, new ways of dealing with problems inside. You become a more skillful person. You become a different person because of your added skills. In this particular case, you become more solid. Things that used to knock you off center don’t knock you off anymore. Emotions coming up in the mind that used to sneak up on you and take over, you can catch them before they get anywhere near taking over. And you can deal with them in time, because you’ve got the powers of mindfulness, you’ve got the powers of alertness, that you just didn’t have before. So there are new skills that make you a new person. And the new vocabulary, the new ways of thinking, and the new language make you a different person as well. So all the time that’s spent learning the grammar of the meditation, here, of course, we’ve got three tenses. There’s the past, the present, and the future. And although the main emphasis is on the present tense, it’s not the only one in this language, because after all, you do have to remember lessons you’ve learned from the past. So don’t anticipate what’s going to happen in the future, especially if you find that you’re getting lazy or devoting less time to the meditation. You’ve got to keep reminding yourself that this is the skill you’re going to need all the way through life. And if you don’t do it now, it just gets put off and put off and put off. And it doesn’t get easier with time. As with learning any language, the older you get, the harder it is to pick things up. You have to force yourself not only to pick up the new vocabulary and learn about it, but, as is the case with any language, it’s not just learning about the rules of grammar. You actually have to keep generating sentences inside. Keep exercising your mind in this new vocabulary, in this new grammar. That’s where you have to force yourself. Because it’s only when you start getting fluent in generating the new ways of thinking that you’re going to get better at it. Otherwise, when greed comes up, you argue with it. You don’t go along with it. When lust comes up, you don’t go along with it. And you have to keep practicing, not going into your old ways, not falling into your old languages. It’s going to be awkward for a while, and because it’s awkward, you keep wanting to go back to the areas where you’re more fluent. Well, we’re awfully fluent in our defilements. Way too fluent. And so even though it may feel awkward, struggling with the new sentences, struggling with the new ideas, this will become a tool that will give you abilities that you didn’t have before, and make you a person that you weren’t before. So do whatever you can to keep at it. Learn to immerse yourself in the breath in the same way that you would immerse yourself in a new language. Just keep at it all the time. Any issue that comes up in the mind, ask yourself, “How does the breath relate to this? How does my ability to stay in the present moment relate to this?” Issues that come up when you’re dealing with other people. How does your ability to stay centered in the present moment help you in your interactions with others? Don’t slip back into your old languages. Stick with a new language. Even though it’s not as fluent as the old ones, it’s the one that’s going to get you to places where the old languages cannot take you at all. So the time spent exercising yourself in this new language is time well spent. There’s no reason to doubt that. Look at the example of the Buddha and the example of the noble ones. The fact that they’re noble is because they learned this new language. you

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