On Good Terms with Your Breath

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The Buddha said that he was an admirable friend to his disciples. Not in the sense that he’d sit around and joke with them, but in the sense that he meant them well. And not just well meaning. He really had their true benefit in mind. And he had knowledge about how to encourage that true benefit. It’s good to keep this in mind as we approach the practice, because sometimes the practice seems daunting and a little bit overwhelming. And John Mahaprabhu talks about how when he was a young monk, the thought of really giving himself over to the practice scared him until he realized, as he said, that the practice is not there as an executioner waiting to kill you. It’s an opportunity. It’s a gift from a friend. So can we practice meditation here? The Buddhas teach you to be on friendly terms with your breath. It’s amazing how here it is, the force of life, that keeps the body and mind together. We have such trouble relating to it. This may be because we’ve spent so much time ignoring it and paying attention to other things. And so when you first settle down with it, it doesn’t seem all that friendly. But as with any friendship, it takes time. You’ve got to observe the breath, listen to the breath. And try various things with it to see how it responds. Listen to your body’s needs right now. Because what the mind needs, whether it knows it or not, is a good place to stay, a place where it can settle down and not have to be pushed out. As the mind tries to stay with other places, it’s like staying in a hotel. You can’t stay very long because they start racking up the bill. But you can stay home as long as you like. So make this your home, make this your friend. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how it feels. Ask yourself, “Where could it be improved?” Try things out and then listen to how things respond. Because that’s how a friendship is developed, through give and take. You test things with the breath. Try longer breathing for a while, shorter breathing. Think of different ways of visualizing the breath to yourself. You can think of one spot that doesn’t have your full attention. Try to keep two spots in the body and mind at the same time. I knew an old school teacher in Thailand one time who had worked out a technique where she focused on the middle of her head and her tailbone at the same time. She thought of a line connecting the two. She said it was like thinking of a wire connecting the two poles of a battery. And as soon as the mind settled in with those two spots, things lit up inside. Because you want to be able to be fully here in your body in the present moment, with a sense of belonging here and wanting to be here, with a sense that it’s a friendly place. Now, there may be little pains here and there in the body, but take them as just par for the course. There’s so much in terms of the breath energy that you can do to make things feel full, satisfying, a friendly place to stay. Because what’s going to happen as you practice is you’re going to start seeing things about yourself that you may not have liked, things that you hold on to that you’re going to have to let go of. And it’s good to have a good, solid place to stay. So that what your discernment starts teaching you about the precariousness of life isn’t going to seem all that threatening, because you’ve got a better place to stay. Remember, the path has all eight factors. You don’t want to miss the factor of right concentration. There’s one passage where the Buddha actually calls it almost the heart of the practice. And all the other factors are just its supports or prerequisites. So you really want to take time to develop this. So when you have insights into how impermanent, say, your friendships are, how impermanent different things in your life are, it won’t feel so threatening, because you’ve got a place that’s more constant. When there’s pain in different parts of the body or pains outside, you’ve got a place in you that’s more easeful, more pleasant. When you see that certain things are outside of your control, at least you’ve got this spot you can come back to. So take time to develop this, and have that thought in mind always that this is your friend. When you go back home and the duties of life start impinging on your time to practice, and impinging on the space of your mind, it’s all too easy to think of the meditation simply as one more chore that you have to do in the course of the day. And it takes on an aspect that’s not all that friendly. And it gets harder and harder to even just sit down and do it. So remember, you’re coming back to your friend. You’re coming back to a source of nourishment. You’re coming back home. This is where you belong. And that’s the old phrase, “It takes a heap of living to make a house a home.” Because this body, when you get back to it in the very beginning, it’s going to be a hard place to stay. Because there’s pain here and there’s a tendency of the mind to jump off there. But if you’re willing to give it some time, adjust things so the energy in the body feels good and the flow feels good in your way of thinking about your relationship to the body. It gets on friendlier terms. And it’s a lot easier to stick with the practice. The mind starts looking for more time, actually, to practice, even just little bits and pieces. You have a five minute break here, a ten minute break there. Okay, good time to sit and get back to the breath. Even just little things. You’re waiting at a stoplight. Get back to the breath. Keep thinking about this as a good place to be. It’s your home. You’ve got friends at home. As you get more acquainted with the breath, you find that you’ve also got the other elements, the warmth of the body and the coolness of the body, the solidity of the body. And you can play with those perceptions. In other words, when things are cold outside like they are right now, think of where in the body is the warmth. There’s one spot in the body that’s going to be warmer than others, or there may be several spots. But try to find where it’s warmest in the body right now and focus on that. When it’s hot outside, you can think of the cool parts in the body in the same way. When you’re feeling lightheaded or dizzy, ask yourself, “Where is the solidity in the body right now?” You can think of the bones. You can think of everything all connecting up. For most of us born in the West, this is a strange vocabulary to use as you’re looking at the body. It’s like going to a Chinese doctor. They don’t ask you the questions that a Western doctor would ask. They look at disease from another angle. They look at your body from another angle, but in the way that they can work with. In the same way, you start thinking about the warmth, the coolness, the solidity, the energy in the body. You find that you can begin to work with these things, and then you get a benefit from them, even more friends inside. So the meditation is not here to make life hard for you. It’s actually to make things a lot easier. So make sure you have the right attitude toward it and use the right technique. Those techniques are called “be with whatever comes up.” Those are not helpful at all, because all too often you’re not ready for whatever comes up. There’s a passage where the Buddha is recommending to the monks that they practice breath meditation. And one of the monks says, “Oh, I already practice breath meditation.” The Buddha looked at him and said, “Well, how do you practice breath meditation?” And the monk said, “I put aside thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, and just am equanimous about the present moment.” And the Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it’s not the kind that gives the best results.” In other words, you’re not here just passively observing whatever comes up. The Buddha went on to discuss the sixteen steps of breath meditation. You look at them and you realize how proactive they are. You make up your mind you’re going to breathe in a particular way, or you’re going to breathe in a way that focuses on a particular aspect of the body or the mind. You’re training yourself. You learn about the breath, you learn about the body, you learn about the mind, not by just sitting there watching them do their own thing. You poke and probe and shape it this way, shape it that way. And that’s how you gain insight. It’s not the case that insight is just a matter of just accepting whatever comes up and saying, “Oh yeah, that’s impermanent.” Insight is seeing the extent to which you actually are fabricating things. In other words, it’s putting together the potentials in the present moment that actually create your experience of the present moment. And you do that by doing it consciously. So you’re consciously working with the breath, calming the breath, being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, breathing in ways that give rise to feelings of pleasure, breathing in ways that steady the mind, breathing in ways that gladden the mind. That’s how you learn about body, feelings, and mind, by experimenting. But you’re experimenting with this sense of being the solid observer. Because when things get out of balance, you know that you can get them back into balance. You’ve learned the skills. So this is a safer and safer place to do those kinds of experiments. So the Buddha’s not trying to push you to do things that are bad or harsh or not in your best interest. He’s a true friend. He’s asking you to do things that are in your own true interest. The path is a friendly path. Just make sure that you’re on good terms with it, that you’re a friend to it, and it’ll be a friend to you.

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