Tend to the Breath

March 29, 2017

Take some good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. That’s what we focus on when we focus on the breath. Not so much the air coming in and out through the nose, but the sense of energy flow in the body. Where do you feel it? If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Make it shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to get a sense of what the body needs right now in terms of the breath, because the breath is a form of nourishment for the body. Or you could say it’s free medicine. Different ways of breathing can have a huge impact on the body, and so it’s good to explore to discover what kind of breathing the body needs right now, to bring it into balance, to give it a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Make the body a place where you want to be right now. This is where we’re going to be for the hour. So make it comfortable. As you breathe in and out, you’re going to think of the energy flowing, not just down from the nose into the lungs. Or the rise of the abdomen. You can think of it all over the body. And John Lee talks of the energy flowing either down the spine or up the spine. And if you know that you have a tendency to have your legs grow numb or your knees to start hurting when you meditate, it may have to do with the fact that the energy in the spine is not open. So as you breathe in, think of the energy going down the spine. All the way down through the legs out to the toes. Open up that area of the body. And realize that the breath energy is all around you. You’re sitting here in the middle of the body. The breath is above you, below you, to your left, to your right, in front, behind. And allow it to bathe you. The sense of well-being that comes with concentration is a crucial element in the path. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have a sense of ease that comes from simply inhabiting your body like this, your mind is going to go running after sensual desires, anything to entertain you right now. Because the mind normally sees there’s nothing but sensuality to entertain you. It forms an escape for pain. That’s where we usually run. But here we’re getting another alternative. Just learn how to inhabit the body. The sense of what they call proprioception, your sense of the body as you feel it from within. Then experiment with the different energy flows that you may begin to detect. Focus, when you begin, on the more obvious ones. Then, as you stay there, you begin to discern some subtler ones as well. Let those flow too. When you look at the Buddha’s teachings as a whole, you realize that they are for the sake of happiness, for the sake of well-being. When he describes how he discovered the path, he actually discovered right resolve and right concentration before he discovered right view. And part of right resolve is what they call resolve on non-ill will, i.e., good will. Good will for yourself, good will for the people around you. And as you meditate, you’re showing good will for both. That’s why we’re here. You want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody else, so that your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. And by the nature of true happiness, your true happiness and other people’s happiness has to come from within. If you’re looking for happiness in things outside, there’s nothing necessarily wrong with that, but you find yourself getting into conflict with other people. But here there’s nobody trying to take your breath away. Nobody’s trying to move in. You can inhabit your body on your own. So make this a good place to stay and allow yourself to feel at ease here. And for the time being, there’s nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do. This is it. Just be with the breath. Remember that this is a blameless happiness. The one thing you do have to watch out for is when a sense of pleasure arises as you breathe in this way. It’s very tempting to drop the breath and just wallow in the pleasure. When that happens, you’ve lost the cause. And of course, when you lose the cause, the effect is going to disappear as well. Either you leave concentration ultimately, or else you get into a zone that’s called delusion concentration, where it’s pleasant, but you’re not really clear about where you are or what you’re doing. Sometimes when you come out of it, you ask yourself, “Was I awake? Was I asleep?” That’s not what you want. So when the breath gets comfortable, keep reminding yourself that the breath is the object that you focus on. The sense of comfort will take care of itself. It will do the work it has to do to soothe the body and soothe the mind. Just allow it to flow freely. The pleasure that you can tap into whenever you want it, because the breath is always there. It’s just that, for the most part, we’re off looking at other things, and so we don’t take care of it. So give it some time. And as you go through the day, give it more time, too. This is not something you do just as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed or when you’re doing walking meditation. Try to do it all the time. Be aware of how the energy feels throughout the day. When you’re engaged in other work, it may be too much to ask to stay with the in-and-out breath, but have a sense of the breath energy flowing in the body, whether it’s smooth or not, whether it’s restricted or not, whether there’s any sense of blockage. If there’s a sense of blockage, think of it opening up, opening up, opening up. And you’ll find that you have times throughout the day when you can focus directly on the breath. As Ajahn Fu used to say, you want to get really good at the meditation, you have to be crazy about it. The kind of craze in which you find that any little opening you have, any little opportunity you have, you go right for it. That way the practice develops some continuity. Sometimes the question comes, “When are we going to make progress?” Well, the progress is just learning how to make this more continuous, be here more solidly. There’s not that much you have to do, it’s just maintain what you’ve got, and it will develop on its own. It’s like trying to get fruit out of a tree. You don’t have to pull the tree up to make it taller. You don’t have to pull the branches off of the trunk to make them spread. You don’t have to pull the flowers out of the tree, or the fruit out of the flowers. All you have to do is just water the tree and the tree will grow on its own. The same with the mind as you develop it through the concentration. We tend to be impatient with ourselves, saying, “I want to see this, I want to see that, I want to get this stage, that stage.” The stages come when you tend to the mind in this way, tend to the breath in this way. And the mind will naturally grow through those stages on its own, without you having to pull them or push them. So the quality of right effort in the path is a delicate thing. Otherwise, you don’t want to be lazy and just let things take their own course. You do have to do some practice here. You do have to tend to the causes. But that’s it. You tend to the causes. And try to do it continually. If you see the mind is going off in the wrong direction, make adjustments. If a breath pattern that felt good for a while no longer feels so good or no longer can keep your attention, well, change things. But all you have to do is look right here, tend to things right here, and they’ll develop. All the potentials for the path away from suffering are right here as well. So there’s nowhere else you have to go. And this is that at the moment. There’s nothing else you have to do. Just tend to the breath. And when you do that, you’ve got a lot of qualities coming together. Mindfulness, i.e., remembering to stay with the breath. Alertness, watching what you’re doing and noticing the results. And ardency, if you see something is wrong, if the mind is slipping off, you bring it right back. When you’re with the breath, you try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Try to keep your attention as continual as possible. All these things are there without you having to think about them. Just tend to things right here, right now. It’s like tending to a garden. You tend to it. And whether the flowers grow quickly or slowly, or the other plants grow quickly or slowly, that’s their business. Your business is to look after the causes. That’s all you have to do.

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