Right Here at the Breath

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When you pay attention to the breath, try to get interested in it. It’s not just in and out. It has lots of ins and lots of outs. Focus on the breath. All it is is just in and out, in and out. How are you going to discern it that way? It’s a gently responded to. If that’s all you see, that’s all you’re going to see. But if you look carefully, you find there’s a lot more to it. There’s not just the air coming in and out the lungs. There’s the flow of energy in the different parts of the body. And those flows of energy are very responsive to the way your mind perceives them. This is where the insight comes. Seeing that if you change the perception, the breath will change. You begin to see the power of your perceptions. And so in the beginning, we’re using perceptions that can help the mind. The mind is settled down, alert at the same time that it’s still. The image they use in the forest tradition is of a hunter. The hunter has to be very still so as not to scare away the animals, but also very alert to know when they’re coming, and very patient because you can’t make an appointment. You want to meal at, say, six o’clock, so you need an animal at four o’clock. You’ve got to stay right where you are and find ways of keeping yourself awake and alert at the same time that you’re still. One of the best ways of doing that is to take an interest in what the different flows of energy in the body are like, how many layers you can perceive, and how your awareness of those different layers can make it harder or easier to settle down. For instance, we feel the breath coming in through the nose, and when you breathe in, sometimes there’s a sensation that energy is coming in from the outside. But what’s making that energy come in? There’s an energy inside already. The breath actually starts inside, on this level, and it’s movement that allows the air to come in and go out. And John Lee talks about the resting places for the breath. And those are good places to look for where the breath energy may be beginning. And if you find that you’re tightened up around those areas, give them a little space. So when the first impulse to breathe comes in, you allow it. You don’t snuff it out. Because all too often we have to snuff it out. We have a preconceived notion that the breath should be like this, the breath should be like that, and the way the breath is actually going to function gets hindered. So think of the areas around those spots, down around the navel, at the tip of the breastbone, middle of the chest, base of the throat, palate, middle of the head, top of the head. Think of all those being opened wide. And whenever an impulse to breathe in starts, let it breathe in. Try not to get in the way. And then see what that does to the rest of your sense of the body, how it may change your posture, and what other breath flows you may find. Examine the breath in areas you may not ordinarily look at, say, the spaces between the toes, behind the knees, anywhere in the body, the breath in the ears. John Fruin talks about finding the breath in the bones. There’s lots to explore here. And if you have a chronic illness, you can figure out which ways of breathing are going to be good for the illness. If you have chronic pain, what kind of ways of breathing are going to be good for the pain? If you find you have a problem with sleepiness, what kind of breathing helps wake you up? There’s a lot the breath can do for you. In John Lee’s comparison to having a friend, you’re walking along on a journey and you’ve got a friend to talk with. And if you’re open and frank with a friend and the friend is open and frank with you, and you really care for each other, then you can make a long journey seem short. If it’s the other way around, though, if you’re not on good terms, the short journey can seem really long. So you want to be on good terms with the breath. This is your companion here in the meditation. And just see if the mind has a tendency to force things too much, or if it gets lackadaisical, you see it in the way you relate to the breath. It’s amazing how so many things in your mind will start coming out just in the way you relate to the breath. Years back, I was in Japan. I was sitting in a restaurant with a Japanese friend. I was pointing out the teapot on the table. He said, “This teapot tells you a lot about the artist.” The choices the artist makes, the way the artist worked with a glaze, worked with a pot. He said, “You can tell a lot about a person by their skills.” I had a Thai friend tell me the same thing about the design of a fence one day. He said, “This fence tells you a lot about the person who built the fence.” In the same way, the way you relate to the breath is going to tell you a lot about the mind. Because the interest in the breath is not just for the sake of the breath. You begin to see it as a mirror for your mind. Your mind’s tendency to jump to conclusions, your mind’s tendency to come to an idea and try to force things to fit in with the idea, you’re going to see that in the way you relate to the breath. If you’re more open and inquisitive, you’ll see that in the way you relate to the breath too. This is why, when you look in the breath, John Lee says, it is like a mirror. It’s going to tell you a lot about the mind. And as you begin to notice your mind as it’s interacting with the breath, then it gets even more fascinating. Dealing on the level of breath tells you a lot about how you relate to your body. But as you begin to see the mind reflected there, you begin to see other patterns in the mind as well. So try to pay good attention to the breath, because it tells you a lot. You learn about what it’s like to have what the Buddha calls “name” and “form” together. Name is mental activity; form is the sense of the body. You begin to see how interdependent they are. That’s because of this interdependence. By looking at the breath, you see the mind. Because of all the physical things in the world, the breath is probably the most responsive to the mind. There’s a Thay in China who says that watching the breath is like following the tracks of the ox. We’re not looking for the tracks, we’re looking for the ox. In this case, the breath is the tracks, and the ox is the mind. But if you know how to read tracks, you’re going to learn a lot about the ox before you find it. So look carefully at the breath. We do have this tendency to think, “Well, if I can get past this, then there’s the next stage, and then there’s the next stage, and then I get to the goal at the end.” As often, when we’re walking someplace, we’re not thinking about what we’re doing as we’re walking. We’re thinking about where we want to go. But if you want to see something about your mind, you look at what you’re doing raw. You’re doing it right now. There was a Zen teacher who said that the cessation of suffering lies in the development of the path. It’s not anyplace else. The point he was making is that you pay very careful attention to what’s right here, right here, right here. Knowing that’s some day it’ll get you there. But in the meantime, don’t worry about there. Worry about here, what you’ve got right here. The more fully attentive you are to what’s right here, the more quickly you’ll go there. So instead of ignoring what’s right here and kind of casting your gaze down the path further, keep it right here. Because it’s in the right here that the goal is found.

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