At Home with the Breath

September 25, 2017

In Pali, when the mind has a good place to be in concentration, one of the terms they use is as a home for the mind, vihara-dhamma. Like when you’re focusing on the breath, this will be your home. And it’s in any case, when you’re moving into a new house, it takes a little bit of adjustment to make it a home. A place where you like to stay. A place where you’re secure. So focus on making the breath comfortable. Start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Because that feeling of the breathing is what we’re talking about here. It’s the movement of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and go out. This energy actually starts in the body itself. Sometimes we have the feeling we have to pull the air in. But the breath actually starts inside, so allow it to expand. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. This is where you’re making this house into a home. You can experiment with long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Or you can simply pose the question in the mind, “What would feel good right now? What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” and see how the body responds. If your thoughts wander off, just bring them back. You want to be thinking about the breath right now and evaluating how you can make the breath feel good. And when it does feel good, then how can you maintain that? Sometimes there’s a tendency, as we focus on the breath, to try to squeeze the beginning and squeeze the end of the breath to mark the difference between the in-breath and the out-breath. That makes it uncomfortable. So allow the breath to flow smoothly, and the in-breath to flow smoothly from the out-breath, and the out-breath to flow smoothly from the in-breath. So you can maintain that sense of well-being. And then, as you can maintain it, you let it spread. Think of the breath going down the spine, think of it going down the legs, down the arms, throughout the torso. You want this to be a really comfortable place to stay, this home you have in the mind. Because if the mind doesn’t have a home or a place to stay, if its home is not comfortable, it’ll leave. It’s like a child suddenly, outside of the house, exposed to all kinds of dangers. Get run over by a car, strangers can come and lure it away. If you want your child to be safe, you keep it home. And if you want it to stay in the home, you give it something good to play with. And here we’re playing with the elements of the body, playing with the breath in particular. Because as we stay in this house, it’s a place both to rest and also to do work. The work here, of course, is to understand our minds. We all want happiness. No matter where you live in the world, you always find people who want happiness. But all too often, the things we do cause stress, cause pain, cause some pretty serious unhappiness. Why is that? Because we have ignorance. We don’t know what we’re doing. Our intentions are right here in the present moment, but our mind is someplace else. It lets the intentions go on automatic pilot. To make another comparison, it’s like a factory, but the owner of the factory doesn’t look after the workers to make sure they’re happy and also to make sure they’re doing their work. So of course, what’s produced by the factory is going to be slipshod. But if you stay in the factory and you keep looking around to make sure that, one, the workers are happy, but two, they’re doing their jobs, then the factory is going to be creating items of high quality. So take some time to rest with the breath, feel at home with the breath, and then be watchful to see what comes up. There will be movements in the mind. And the more clearly you can see them, the more clearly you have a sense of where they’re going to go and whether they’re worth going with. The Thai Jhans talk about the mind having currents that flow out, out to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. And some of the currents are good, but a lot of them are troublemakers. We go looking because of greed. We go looking because of anger. We go looking because of delusion. And if we go flowing out with these things, then we just create more trouble. But if we have a solid place to stay, right here, then we have a solid place to stay. Then you can watch the tendency of the mind to go flowing out. You see, if it’s not worth going with, then it will just die. It’s because we go running with these things that they take on a long life. But if you don’t go running with them, they just stop. They go a little ways and stop on their own. So there’s a good place to stay so that the mind doesn’t need to go running after these things. You stay inside, and you realize that you’re not shut inside. There are windows, you can see what’s going on outside, but you’re not going outside into the heat, into the dangers outside the house. You’ve got a good place to stay. There are times when you do have to go outside and you know you’re going for a reason. And when you’ve taken care of the business that needs to be taken care of, you can come right back. And you begin to realize that there’s not that much need to go outside. This is the good thing about this home in the mind. It’s not like homes outside. We look at the homes outside, we look at the news now. Hurricanes all over the place, people having their homes wiped out. Hurricanes, fires. External homes don’t give you that much protection. But the internal home gives you lots of protection because it protects you against yourself. The mind’s tendency to create suffering, to create damage to itself, through its greed, its aversion, its delusion. But you stay right here. You’ve got your safe place inside. And as you see the dangers coming up in the mind, you have your tools to deal with them. You have the strength to deal with them. All too often we know that we shouldn’t go with these things, but we just don’t have enough strength to withstand them. But when there’s a sense of well-being that fills the body, you can ask yourself, “Why would you want to go?” So remind yourself, this is a good place to stay. And then if it’s not yet a good place to stay, you can make it a good place to stay by being quiet, by being observant, and giving your full attention to the breath, your full attention to getting the mind to settle down. The chant just now talked about respect for concentration. We give it our full attention and then it will help us in return. Because after all, the whole purpose of doing this, the whole beginning of wisdom for the Buddhists, is taking your desire for true happiness seriously. Realizing that true happiness is a worthy goal. Because happiness, if it’s true, has to come from within. And it’s not selfish. It doesn’t need to take in anything away from anyone else. You develop these resources you have right here inside your home. You develop good qualities, mindfulness, alertness, wisdom, the desire to act in ways that cause true happiness. From wisdom comes compassion. Realizing that your true happiness can’t depend on anyone else’s harm. And then purity, the willingness to be very careful in what you do to make sure that your actions do fall in line with your ideals. These are all the virtues of the Buddha which we can develop inside and decorate our homes inside with our internal Buddha. So this is a home that’s good all around. It’s good for us, it’s good for the people, it’s good for the people around us. So show some respect for the breath. Show some respect for your desire for true happiness. The two go together.

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