Friends with the Breath (outdoors)

August 26, 2018

The breeze outside is comfortable. How’s the breeze inside the body? Take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths. And tell yourself you’re gonna stay with the breath for the whole hour. So make the breath something good to stay with. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Ask yourself which parts of the body need more breath energy right now. And try breathing into different parts one at a time. Breathe into the chest to begin with and breathe into the stomach. Then down into the legs. Breathe into the arms. Breathe down the back. Breathe through all the parts of the head. Keep circulating around the body like this for a while to make sure that the whole body is getting nourished by the breath. And also have a sense of how the breath feels in different parts. In some parts it’s going to be more obvious than others. In some parts it’s going to be more subtle. If there’s no breath at all, you wouldn’t feel that part of the body to begin with. So there’s got to be some breath there. And as you’re breathing, you’re simply adding more breath to the breath that’s already there. You’re not stuffing breath into the spaces in the solid parts of the body. You’re simply adding more energy to an energy field. When you’re thinking this way, the breath can be very smooth. You’re not pushing against anything. You’re not squeezing anything. You’re allowing the breath to nourish the breath. There’s no clear dividing line. There’s no dividing line between the breath coming in and the breath that’s already there. So there should be no sense of conflict as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Let it be very smooth. You want to be on good terms with the breath. Become a friend to your breath. And as with any friendship, you have to find out what the other person needs. What does the breath need right now? Does it need to be made longer, shorter? Does it need to be moved in different parts of the body? When you move it into different parts of the body, you don’t force it. Simply think about allowing it to flow there. And keep on top of what it needs. Sometimes long breathing is good for a while and then it’s not so good. You don’t need it anymore. You want shorter, more shallow. Sometimes it gets too shallow. Too weak. You begin to get drowsy. So you’ve got to strengthen it. So try to keep tabs on what the breath needs. And when you keep tabs on what the breath needs, then the breath will provide you with what you need, which is a good place to stay. The mind needs a home. As the Buddha said, “There is no happiness other than peace.” In other words, real happiness comes when the mind can find a place where it can stay. It doesn’t have to keep picking up and moving around. You can imagine what life would be like if you had to move around every day, gather all your belongings and move to another house, then to another house, another house. That’s what the mind is like from moment to moment. It’s going to have a lot more happiness, a lot more peace, if it can just stay for a while. The breath gives you a place where you can stay. As long as you’re alive, it’s going to be here. So you take care of it, it’ll take care of you. And as for any distractions that come up when the breath gets more comfortable and the breath gets more interesting, you’re less likely to want to go for the distractions. We talk about the breath being interesting. That means you look at the various ways the breath has an impact on the body. Say if there’s a pain in a part of the body, how can you use the breath to help? Well, first you find another part of the body that already is comfortable. Focus your attention there. And then think of that good breath energy spreading from that spot and going right through the pain. Because all too often when a pain develops, we tend to build up a little wall around it out of fear that it’s going to spread. And we think if we can put a wall around it, it won’t go anywhere. Well, the wall is often part of the problem. And it’s with that wall that we grab hold of the pain and then pass it on from one moment to the next. In other words, we’re passing on tension, we’re passing on a blockage from one moment to the next. There’s no need for that. It doesn’t help anything at all. So think of the breath breathing through any walls of tension you may have around the pain. And remind yourself, pain doesn’t have a shape. Even though it’s caused by a physical problem in the body, the pain itself is not a physical thing. It’s something separate. And so allow it to be shapeless. And as you do so, you find that you won’t be gathering it up and passing it on to the next moment. The pain in one moment stays in that moment. And when that moment is gone, that pain is gone. It may be replaced by another pain in another moment, but that’s going to go too. When you learn how to think about the pain in this way, it’s a lot easier to deal with it. And the breath is giving you a handle. It helps you erase the little walls the mind builds in the body. And breathe through any tension that may be developing. So the breath not only gives you a comfortable place to stay, it gives you some tools to use when you notice that the mind is making itself suffer over things it doesn’t have to suffer over. This is the important lesson in the Buddhist teachings, that the pains that weigh down the mind, the sufferings that weigh down the mind, are optional. They’re caused by our actions. And those are actions that we can stop doing. If we replace them with other skills. So working with the breath gives you an alternative set of skills. So you can drop the activities that have been causing suffering, that you’ve been doing in ignorance, and replace them with skills that you’re doing in knowledge, or with knowledge. This way, when you develop a friendship with the breath, the two of you working together can do things that neither one of you could do on your own. Because the breath on its own just comes in and out willy-nilly. And as it comes in and out willy-nilly, it’s just basically keeping you alive. The mind on its own can think about pain and theorize about pain and reason through pain. But if it doesn’t have any tools for getting into the body, it’s all just theory. But when you’ve got the two working together, your awareness together with the breath, you can come to a better understanding of what’s going on in the body, what’s going on in the mind, what you’re doing that’s creating suffering, what you can do to stop. And that way, your friendship gets real results. So look after the breath, take care of its needs, be a good friend with the breath, and it’ll be a good friend for you.

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