Grounded in the Breath

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When you start meditating, it’s good to survey your body, survey your mind, to see what you’re working with. Start with the body. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and see how the process of breathing feels. Where do you feel in the body? Where is it most prominent? Can you make it comfortable? What would be comfortable right now? What would be satisfying, gratifying? Where are the spots in the body that are most sensitive to the breath energy? For some people, it’s the middle of the chest. For other people, it’s the stomach. For some people, it’s around the eyes. So it could be anywhere in the body where you feel that a particular way of breathing is especially gratifying. You want to find those sensitive spots because otherwise the breath can become very mechanical very quickly. You’re asking yourself, “Which parts of the body are pulling the breath in? Which parts are more neutral?” Why do they have to do all the work? Can’t they get some breath energy themselves? So ask a few questions before you settle in and survey your mind. What attitudes is it bringing in from the day? Are there any issues you have with people around you? Can you put those issues aside? Older issues that may come up, can you put them aside? One of the reasons we usually have the chant about the Brahma-viharas before each meditation is to remind us that, one, we do want to have goodwill for ourselves and for all other beings. We’re looking for a happiness that harms no one. Because we know that if we harm other people, the harm is going to come back to us. And even if people have been behaving in horrible ways, what does it mean to have goodwill for someone who’s been behaving horribly? Reflect on the fact that their happiness is going to depend on their actions. You’re hoping that they’d learn how to behave in a skillful way, that they see the harm that they’re doing and voluntarily want to stop. And if there’s anything you can do to help them in that direction, you’re happy to help. As for people who you feel should be punished a little bit before they find some happiness, ask yourself, “What’s accomplished by that?” How many people connect the fact that they’ve done something wrong with their lack of happiness? A lot of people, when they get punished, get more resistant. And wouldn’t you like to be able to see the error of your ways on your own and not have to deal with a lot of suffering? Before you change your ways, go grant the same attitude toward other people. At the same time, wishing goodwill for all beings helps put you in a better frame of mind. You’ve got a better perspective on the issues of the day. Think of all beings in all directions, all levels of the cosmos. When Jeon Moon had a chant that he would do on a regular basis, extending goodwill to beings of all kinds, it went through lots of different kinds. Those who are noble, those who are not noble, devas, human beings, common animals, hungry ghosts, beings in hell, men, women. You think about all the different classes of beings there are. How many there have been, how many there will be. It helps to open up the mind. When you take that larger perspective, then when you come into the present moment, you’re coming from a better direction. If you come straight from the issues of the day, you tend to drag those issues in with you. If you had a miserable day, then a bad meditation or a meditation that starts badly is just one more instance of a bad day. You get yourself into a bad feedback loop. So taking the larger perspective helps to pull you out of that loop. Then you can come into the present moment from a better angle, seeing it in more impersonal terms. You’ve got the breath, you’ve got awareness. The breath creates feelings of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain. You want to pull all those together. Keep them together. Have them all fill the body. Because when they all fill the body, you get to see things in your mind that you wouldn’t have seen before. If your awareness is too narrowly focused, it may be good for concentration sometimes. Sometimes it is necessary to start out with a smaller focus. But if you want to gain some insight into the mind, you have to expand the range of your awareness. It’s like a theater. If there’s a spotlight on the stage, it brightens up that one spot, but it puts everything else in the dark. What you want is a theater with all the lights up, both the lights on the stage and in the audience. So when you’ve surveyed the mind, surveyed the breath, surveyed the body, try to bring them together in a way that feels good. Stay based here in the breath. When the Buddha talks about the different stages of breath meditation, he doesn’t just talk about the steps dealing with the body, the steps dealing with feelings, the steps dealing with the mind, and then the steps dealing with putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. But in every case, he says, they’re all related to the breath. If you want to understand feelings, you’ll notice that you can actually create feelings by the way you are alert to the breath. You can create feelings of pleasure. As you’re more consistently aware of the breath, you get more demanding about what a good breath is going to be. If you’ve got other things preoccupying you, it’s okay for the body to go on automatic pilot. Its breathing is okay. It keeps you alive. It allows you to think. But here you want more out of the breath than just that. If you’re alert to the breath, you begin to see there are rough patches in the breath. You want to smooth them out. You can sense that you’re breathing in a way, as the Thais say, that the breath doesn’t fill your stomach. Think of it filling all the abdomen, all the torso. As you give more attention to the breath, you can make it more satisfying. At the same time, you’re developing good qualities of the mind. Mindfulness, ardency, alertness, they’re all right here. And that’s for the qualities needed to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The Buddha emphasizes equanimity. When you’re aware of the breath and sense its satisfaction here, you can be more equanimous about things outside. This is the kind of equanimity that the Buddha recommends. Not just telling yourself to be non-reactive, but to give you a sense of well-being inside that’s independent of the world outside. So your equanimity is nurtured by a sense of well-being. You realize you don’t have to feed on the world. You’ve got better food inside. It’s like going to a place where there’s no food. The food is pretty bad, but you’ve got your own food that you’re carrying with you. You can be pretty equanimous about the fact that the food there is no good, because you don’t need it. You’re not thinking of feeding on it. You’re feeding inside. So you’ve got all four frames of reference right here with the breath. And it’s simply a matter of which ones you’re going to focus on at any one time. Sometimes the issue is with the body, with the breath. Sometimes the issue is with the feelings. Sometimes it’s with the state of your mind. But when you stay with the breath, you’re in a good place to see all of these things. In John Lee’s image, he’s sitting in the middle of a net, like the net for a tennis match or a volleyball game, or the net that you’d use to catch fish. The interstices of the net are wide open, so you can see in all directions. After all, your defilements come at you from all directions. And the problem is, a lot of them are the voices that you take as being your voice inside. So you want to have an all-around awareness that encompasses not only your sense of the body, but also your sense of you inside here. Use the breath as your foundation. You’re based in the breath. And you can see in all directions. Here’s back when I was teaching a meditation retreat back in the day. The person who organized the retreat said on, I think it was the third or fourth day, “Well, now’s the time to switch from samatha to vipassana.” And I had to explain to him that in the forest tradition, we don’t make a clear distinction, saying you do one or the other. You basically try to get the mind into concentration, and you’re developing both tranquility and insight. It’s simply a question of which you’re going to emphasize. And here again, you stay right here. So you never really leave the breath. In Ajahn Lee’s explanations for going through the different stages of jhana, you stay with the breath all the way. I’ve heard some people say, “Well, you leave the breath and go to the feeling of pleasure.” But that can get pretty vague very fast. If you’re with the breath, you’re grounded. You stay with it until it stops. And it’s not because you’re forcing it to stop, it just gets more and more refined. In the sense of the breath energy filling the body gets more and more satisfying, more and more constant. So you have less and less of a felt need to breathe. In fact, breathing becomes laborious in some cases, even if you’re forcing the body to breathe when it doesn’t need to. It can get pretty unpleasant. So you stay with the breath until everything in the body is still. And that’s when you start going into the more formless states. But until you reach that point, you want to stay based here, grounded here. Because it’s at that point, as I said, from which you can look all around. Feelings are right here. Your mind states are right here. The mental qualities that go into constructing a mind state, they’re right here, too. The qualities you need to use in order to put aside greed and distress with reverence to the world, they’re here, too. So when you’re right here, you’re grounded. When you’re here, you’re at the right place. Sometimes you need to forage around. As Ajahn Lee says, this is your home base. But there are times when to get food you don’t stay at home. You go out foraging. When there are problems of lust, you contemplate the body. You contemplate the drawbacks of sensuality. When there are problems of anger, you contemplate how anger is not helping anybody. It’s certainly not helping you. You try to develop goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. So there are other topics that you might use, but you always want to come back home. This breath meditation is the topic that grounds all the others, keeps everybody in the mind well-balanced. So do your best to stay right here.

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