Taming the Elephant

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We’ve lived with our breath all our life, but we haven’t paid much attention to it. Now that we’re going to pay attention to it, it’s like trying to establish a friendship with someone that you’ve lived with but you never really paid attention to them. You’ve neglected them, sometimes mistreated them without realizing it. So sometimes the period of negotiation will take a while. The Chan Lee talks about this. He says the elements in the body, earth, wind, water and fire, they don’t trust you. As you push them around, usually when there’s a strong emotion of one kind or another, the breath gets pushed around. We don’t think of it in terms of breath energy. But there are ways that we sense the body. The breath energy gets pushed in different ways based on fear, based on anger, lust. And so when you’re trying to settle down, often the simple fact that you’re paying attention to the body will bring up these old patterns of breath. And you’ll associate them with the emotion that you had at the time. But it’s simply a breath pattern. If you learn to see it that way, then it’s a lot easier to settle down. You realize that something has to be done. And there are things you can do with it based on how you relate to the breath, where you’re focused, how you’re focused, what channels of energy have to be opened up. We talked about a tightness in the chest, a tightness in the stomach. That comes when you focus in on the breath. So there are different ways you can deal with that. One is that you can change the focus, focus someplace else. Or try to focus in a way that doesn’t squeeze things. All too often we think that if I’m going to concentrate on something, I’ve got to squeeze it. Stay there. Learn how to be with something and allow it to open up as you focus. There’s something that hunters call “scatter vision.” You need it when you’re hunting for mushrooms in the forest. You need to be present to the whole range of your vision without focusing too much attention on any one spot, putting too much pressure on any one spot. So that wherever the mushrooms may be, you have no idea where they’re going to be. You may have some ideas of where they’re likely to be, but you want to give equal attention to the whole range of your awareness. Try to develop that same awareness with the body. You’re focused on the body, but everything gets equal pressure, everything gets equal attention. Nothing gets pressed too hard. Because if you press too hard on any one spot, on any one part of the body, it squeezes the breath energy, pushes it into some places where it gets locked up. And then you have to think of ways of getting it unlocked. That’s when there’s pressure in the chest. Think of a channel of energy going out through the arms, out through the palms of the hands, out into the air. If there’s something in the lower part of the body, it’s going down the legs and out the soles of the feet. If it’s in the head, think of it going out the eyes or out the ears. In other words, try to keep things open. All of this comes under what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. You’re negotiating inside so the mind and the body can be together on good terms. Thinking again of a John Lee’s analogy, if you treat the breath well, if you show attention to it, show some kindness to it, be curious about what it seems to need. It’ll repay you, it’ll respond. You’ll find that when the breath energy is allowed to flow through the body, without putting too much pressure on any one spot or any series of spots, things begin to flow in harmony through the body. There’s a sense of fullness. When you breathe in, you don’t push things in too much. When you breathe out, you don’t squeeze them out too much. If the body’s going to breathe, you just allow it. When it breathes out, don’t think of squeezing the air. Let the energy out. Let the energy stay full in the body. And you find that can be very pleasant. Now some people don’t like that feeling of fullness. I had a student one time who, after several years of meditating, came and said, “I can’t do this anymore. Every time I focus on the breath, I get this feeling of fullness in the body.” And I told her, “That’s what people want.” Well, it turned out she’d almost drowned twice earlier in her life. That sense of fullness reminded her when she had almost drowned. So I said, “You’ve got to change your perceptions. Remind yourself you’re surrounded by air. You can breathe whenever you want.” So you learn how to adjust your expectations, adjust your ideas about what you want out of the body. And you find that the body can provide you with a sense of well-being that you wouldn’t have expected. The feeling of lightness that goes with the fullness. As if you’re just barely touching the ground. And learn how to maintain that. Again, this comes under direct thought and evaluation. As you learn how to adjust the mind to the breath, how you learn how to adjust the breath to the mind. So you learn how to be together on good terms. So take an interest in this. This is an important part of the meditation. Learning how to listen to the needs of the body. Notice when you’re putting too much pressure here or there, backing off a little bit, but maintaining steady interest. As things get really comfortable, you realize you don’t have to analyze things anymore. This is how your concentration goes to a deeper stage. The Buddha describes this in one of his analogies of training an elephant. Bring an elephant into the city. You’ve captured it from the forest. And you tie it to a post. Now, sure, it’s not going to like it. It used to wander as it liked, and now it can’t go anywhere. So you have to make it happy to be there. In those days, they would play music for the elephant, speak nicely to it. When the elephant finally accepted the grass that they offered, then they knew the elephant was going to survive. So it would get used to being with human beings, used to being trained. But it can be happy there. So even though it may seem restrictive to stay with the breath and not think of anything else, when you really pay attention to the breath, treat it nicely, it’ll treat you nicely. And then you can settle down. The period in which the Buddha talks about trying to get the elephant to be happy to be in the city. He compares that to the description of right mindfulness. Keeping track of the body and in and of itself. Ardent, alert, mindful. Putting aside greed and distress with reverence to the world. That basically corresponds to the first jhana. Then when it settles down that way, and you don’t have to do so much negotiation, then you can stop your internal chatter. You stay with a single perception of breath. As the Buddha says, be focused on the body in and of itself, but don’t think any thoughts about the body. The same way you’re focused on the breath in and of itself. But you don’t have to think thoughts about the breath anymore. You don’t have to talk to yourself in full sentences about the breath. Just remind yourself, stay with the breath, breath, breath. And that’s when the mind gets into a state of oneness with the breath. Your awareness fills the body, the breath fills the body. Sense of well-being and fullness all fill the body. This is where your concentration really becomes one. Some people say that jhana is not absorption, that it’s simply learning how to think skillful thoughts consistently. Well, the Buddha says that’s how you start getting the mind into jhana, by thinking skillful thoughts consistently about the breath. And the next step, as I said, you’re keeping track of the breath, but you’re not thinking thoughts about the breath. And you’re certainly not thinking thoughts about anything else. So the mind is very quiet, with a sense of well-being. As the Buddha said, in a state like this, then the old conversation that you had to have about figuring out where the breath was going to go, how you’re going to bring balance into the different parts of the body, you see that now as a disturbance, as something that limits the sense of peace and well-being in the mind. This is the state where the elephant is happy to be in the city with human beings, and it forgets its longings for the forest. It likes the human beings, it likes the city now. And the idea of going back to the forest and foraging as it used to, is no longer that appealing. In the same way, the idea of continuing to think lots of skillful thoughts about skillful things has no appeal right now. You want to enjoy the sense of stillness, which gets very expansive. Now you will have to do contemplation later on as you pull out of the state to understand it. But for the time being, learn how to enjoy being here. You’re taming your mind, just like they tamed the elephant. As I said, you’ve negotiated a peace ensigned to the mind and the body, or in friendly terms. You understand the movements of breath energy in the body. And you learn how to treat them kindly, gently, and they respond. It’s in this way you get along together well. You’ve established peace inside.

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