Concentration Food

October 29, 2024

One of the reasons why we focus on the breath is because it’s so responsive to your thoughts and perceptions. You tell yourself to breathe in long, and it goes long. To make it shorter, it becomes shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. The breath responds. You can tell it to go to different parts of the body. Here, of course, we’re not talking about the air coming in and out through the nose. The Buddha classifies the in-and-out breath as part of the wind property in the body itself. It’s the energy flow in the body. It goes through the nerves, goes through the blood vessels, out to the pores. And as you breathe in and out, you get more sensitive to how the breath element feels in the body. You may begin to notice that sometimes it flows up as you breathe in, and sometimes it flows down. Sometimes the breath energy in the body seems to be harmonious, everything’s breathing together. Other times it’s not. It’s as if different parts of the body were doing different things. So we’re trying to use the breath to make the body a good place to be here in the present moment, which means you want to think about the breath in ways that are more soothing when the mind is feeling frazzled, more energizing when you’re feeling tired, more relaxing when you’re feeling tensed. So first make a survey of how things actually feel as you breathe in and breathe out. And then do some correction. And again, you don’t have to force things. Sometimes you’ll find that if you push the breath into the different parts of the body, you’re actually pushing the blood, and it runs up against the walls of the blood vessels and can create pressure. And you can create headaches and all other kinds of problems that way. So think of it as purely energy. You don’t have to push it. There are occasional times when the breath energy gets into a weird feedback loop, and you do have to push it just as a way of resetting the body. Back when I had migraines, I sometimes found that I would get into a strange feedback loop with my breath. To avoid the pain of the migraine, I would breathe in constricted ways. And of course, when you breathe in constricted ways, it creates more pain in the body. So to counteract that, I would deliberately breathe in a way that was uncomfortable, expanding my abdomen as much as I could, each time I breathed in, each time I breathed out. Do that for about five minutes, and it seemed to reset the clock. But other times, you want to be more gentle with the breath. Remember that it does respond to words in the mind, to sentences in the mind. And sometimes it responds more easily to pictures that you create in the mind. So be working with both, the words and sentences. The Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thought to the breath, and then you evaluate how it should go. If it’s not going well, then you tell yourself, “How about this? How about that?” And see how the body responds. You keep this up until you’ve got the breath comfortable enough that you feel OK settling down. Then you can switch to individual words, like “deep,” “soothing,” “calm,” “energizing,” or just “breath, breath, breath.” Or a picture that you hold in mind of how the breath flows in the body. Sometimes you can think of it coming in from outside, not only through the nose, but also through the eyes and the ears, in from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, going deep into the brain, and then deep down into the body. You can think of it coming in and out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. You can visualize a cocoon of breath energy on the body and ask yourself if what you’re feeling of the breath energy in the body right now extends beyond the physical body. Is the cocoon healthy? Or are there holes in it? Ragged edges? And sometimes you can sense that something doesn’t feel quite right. Well, picture it becoming better. Because the breath is really responsive. To pictures you hold in mind. That way the mind gets into deeper concentration with less conversation and steadier images, steadier directions. Because you’ve got the breath energy here all the time, if the perceptions lapse, the breath is there to sort of pick up the slack. This is one of the reasons why you work with the body first before you go to the more formless attainments. Because with formless ones, like space or consciousness, you really depend on the consistency of that perception. Because there’s nothing to hold it in place, nothing to fill in the gaps that the perception goes. So first you work with the breath, because the breath is there. Even when the perception lapses, your feeling of the breath is there. That helps to create some continuity. In this way the mindfulness develops. There’s some confusion about what mindfulness means. It’s not just your awareness. It’s not just your consciousness. It’s holding something in mind. In this case you’re holding the breath in mind. It’s a way of reminding yourself, “Any other thoughts come in there now? Welcome right now.” They’re off topic. You’re not here to think about other things. You’re here to establish a good relationship with the breath and through the breath, through the whole body. And mindfulness goes together with alertness. That’s what’s aware of what’s going on. But alertness here is focused on what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. Then finally there’s ardency, which is trying to do this well. These are all things you develop. Your consciousness is there, but it’s constructed. If there’s clinging to it, that’s part of the First Noble Truth. It’s to be comprehended. But mindfulness is part of the path. It’s to be developed. Your alertness is to be developed. And you do it through the ardency. This is why when John Lee places ardency among those three faculties, or those three qualities, under the heading of discernment. Because you’re wise enough to realize that we’re not just here to watch. We’re here to make a difference. And the desire to make a difference in a skillful way is part of the path. It’s to be developed. Craving, simply to have things be the way you want them to be. Get the sensual pleasures you want or sensual fantasies you want. Craving to take on an identity or craving to abolish an identity you’ve already taken on. These three forms of craving are part of the cause of suffering. Those are to be abandoned. But the desire to do this well, that’s part of the path. So that’s to be developed. So we work on mindfulness. We work on ardency. We work on alertness. We work on using our direct thought and evaluation, our inner conversation, in a way that’s really helpful to getting us to settle down. And why do you want to settle down? Because you see things a lot more clearly when you do. We can run around in our thoughts, even good thoughts, but it’s just a lot of running around. We run off into a thought world. It’s another state of becoming. It’s another identity that you take on temporarily. And when you’re in the identity, it’s hard to see it. It’s when you’re able to step back that you can see what’s going on. It’s like the difference between watching a movie simply for the enjoyment or stepping back a bit to ask yourself, “Well, how did I create these effects? What is the purpose, the director’s vision? How is the actor going about trying to create the character?” You’re analyzing things, and you’re stepping back from it. And that way you’re not sucked in. In the same way, you don’t want to be sucked into your thoughts. You want to see them from the outside. And getting a good firm foundation in the breath is a good place to stand outside your thoughts. So when they come up, you’re in a position to decide, “Do I really want to go into this? Do I really want to encourage this?” So learning how to still your thinking as much as possible allows you to gain some control over your thinking. So that when you do decide you want to think about something, talk to yourself about something, it’s a lot more productive. It’s a lot wiser. So there will be a part of the mind that says, “When you get really still, this is stupid. Nothing’s going on. You’re not analyzing anything. You’re not coming to any new understandings.” Just tell yourself you’re learning an important skill that you’re going to be using. It’s not the whole skill, but it’s a really important piece to learn to encourage. Encourage yourself to want to stay here, to appreciate the stillness, to appreciate the sense of well-being that comes as the mind settles down. And you can spread that sense of well-being throughout the whole body. So you want to learn how to enjoy this. The Buddha never says to be aware of enjoying this too much. After all, it is your food, the food for the practice. And so allow it to nourish you, nourish the mind, nourish the body. And then when things are nourished, then you can do your work. In one of the Buddha’s images, the practice is like having a fortress on a frontier. You need mindfulness as the gatekeeper to make sure that the enemy doesn’t come in. In other words, you need mindfulness to recognize skillful and unskillful thoughts. And if an unskillful thought starts moving in, you cut it off as quickly as you can. Then there are the soldiers. The soldiers are right effort. They have their weapons, which is knowledge of the Dhamma. But both the gatekeeper and the soldiers need to be fed. And that’s what concentration is for. Concentration is compared to the food stores. Grass for the horses, honey and ghee for the soldiers and the gatekeeper. So nourish your mind well with stillness, so the other aspects of the path can have strength.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/241029_Concentration_Food.mp3>