Skills of Mindfulness, Skills of the Breath

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The formal name for breath meditation is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. And it’s a skill. You’re learning skills of the breath and skills of mindfulness. And it’s important to remember that as you develop a skill, you’re going to be able to do things you couldn’t do before. And you become a person that you weren’t before. This is true of any skill. I knew a woman in Thailand one time who seemed to be very expressive with her hands. When she talked, she was very fluid in her hand movements. And I discovered that she’d been learning Thai classical dance ever since she was a child. And it infused the way she used her gestures. It became a part of her. And you want to work with the breath so that your knowledge of the breath and your knowledge of mindfulness becomes a part of you. Because they’ll enable you to do things you couldn’t do before. And you find that as you develop the skill, the desires you have also become different desires. It’s like growing up. The things you liked as a child, once you learn the skills of being an adult, those childish things don’t seem so attractive anymore. Because you have a wider range of skills, there are more things you can do. You have fewer limitations. It’s like gaining skills of the breath. You realize that by changing the breath in different ways, you have a different effect on the body. And this is something you learn from trial and error. But you begin to see that there are different times when your heart is racing and you can calm it down by the way you breathe. If you’re feeling dizzy, you can think of the earth element combined with the breath. That helps to ground you. Or if you’re feeling depressed and down, breathe in a way that makes you feel lighter. It’s not attacking all the causes of the depression, but it’s certainly helping with the physical side. So often a thought gets into the body, and then it becomes that emotion. And you’re dealing not only with the thoughts racing through your mind, but also the physical symptoms. And they can be overwhelming. But if you learn how to breathe in a way that counteracts those symptoms, you’re not so overwhelmed. You have a place where you can step outside of the race going through your mind. You don’t feel that you have to be pulled into it. So you stay with calm breathing when you need to be calm. You can find that there’s an energizing breath that energizes you when you’re feeling tired. Basically, long in, short out, gives you more energy. But you also find that there are other ways of breathing that are suited for your particular problem and your particular time. When John Lee talks about starting with the breath at the back of the neck, part of the reason was because he was suffering from heart problems at the time. And anyone with a heart problem knows that there’s a lot of tension that builds up at the back of the neck. It goes into the jaws. So you have to learn how to breathe through those things. And also learn what it means to breathe through something. It’s not like you’re trying to destroy it. It’s just that in a tight part of the body, you think, “Let the breath in and just as you penetrate, let that part of the body have the breath.” And it will change things without you having to direct it. You direct your thoughts. You direct your mental images to this. A lot of people complain that they have tight bands of pressure on their head when they start meditating. Well, think of that band as breath energy. It’s a part of the mind that needs to be suffused as you breathe in. And you find that the band becomes a lot more tolerable. So there are a lot of things you can do. You’re not totally at the mercy of your old habits of breathing and dealing with breath energy. For most of us, we don’t think about breath energy, so a lot of this goes unnoticed. But as you become more sensitive to it, you begin to realize that you have been playing with the breath energy already, sometimes in very unskillful ways. So with breathing down the spine, breathing down the legs, breathing through the torso, breathing in through your eyes, in through your ears, in from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, into the brain, or down from the neck, down into the heart, you begin to realize you have a better grasp of what the breath can do. And it can get you through a lot of problems that you otherwise would have felt overwhelmed by. And that’s going to make you a different person, not so quick to react to things in negative ways. Because you have a safe place to stay that’s near where the physical reaction is, but not overwhelmed by it, not swallowed up by it. That puts you in a different position. It changes the balance of power inside. And as you’re mindful of the breath, you learn not only about the breath, but you also learn about mindfulness. And that becomes a skill you develop too, a set of skills. Because our mind is so quick to forget, we jump from one desire to the next desire. It’s almost like we’re in a different world for each desire. And we often go unconscious as we go from one world to the next. It’s like the curtain they pull down on a play. When they move from one scene to the next scene, they want you to have the illusion that when the curtain comes up, you’re in a certain place. You’re not in the theater. You’re in another world. And it would destroy the illusion if you saw the stagehands taking the old scenery away and bringing it new. So they pull the curtain down. And it’s the same with us as we go from one desire to the next. Because the mind wants to tell us, “This is something you really want. You want to focus your attention here.” And it doesn’t want you to keep focusing on something else that actually might get in the way of this new desire. So we blank out for a bit as we go from one world to the next. This is one of the reasons why our lives are so scattered, because our desires go in all kinds of directions. There’s not much consistency to them. But as you’re working with the breath, one of the things you have to learn is how to deal with distractions, thoughts that come up. You know they’re there, but you don’t get sucked in. Or if you see that’s something you really need to think about, okay, you know how to go into the thought and then come back out and not forget the breath. This process of recognizing when you’ve drifted off and bringing yourself back to the breath may be frustrating, but you’re learning an important skill, how not to forget. This way it makes it possible to become more consistent in your desires. You’re not working at cross-purposes all the time. Or even though the desires may be there, you’re in a position where you can choose, “Do I really want to go with this desire? Do I have a higher desire? Do I want to take refuge in the breath? Take refuge in the Buddha. It’s because we want to be like him, i.e., we want to be happy like him. So it means we have to act like him. Take refuge in the Dhamma. Remember the teachings he left us, how he did it, and how we can do it too. Take refuge in the Sangha, the fact that there are other people who’ve been able to do this. It wasn’t just the Buddha. All kinds of people, all different backgrounds, all different ages, men, women, children. Poor, rich, educated, uneducated. We think about that and we realize that when they can do it, we can too. So really what happens is you have to realize that you’ve got to get your desires all focused in this direction. And you have to learn how to say”no” to the desires that pull you away. This is where the skill of mindfulness helps. Keep remembering. When a new desire comes up and you say, “Is this in line with my real aims in life or is it going to pull me down some other path?” If your mindfulness is weak, it’s very easy to forget. But as your mindfulness gets stronger, you can go from one thought world to the next thought world and not blank out. You can pick up a thought, look at it, decide, “Is this something I want to go with?” If it’s not, you can let it go. If you do want to go with it, you can let it go. You know how to come back. In John Lee’s images, there’s an air runway. The plane takes off and goes around and has a safe place to come back. Most of us don’t have runways. Our planes take off and then they crash. Then we’re able to reassemble ourselves and take off again, crash again. So here’s a safe place to land. You can come back to the breath when your thinking is done. You can get the mind strengthened. There’s a sense of refreshment that comes with the breath. And there’s more consistency in your desire to make yourself the kind of person who can follow the Buddhist path, make yourself the kind of person who can find happiness. The skills of the breath, the skills of mindfulness, give more consistency to what you’re doing and more consistency to who you are. Because with each desire, there’s a new identity and a new world. If you keep jumping from one desire to another without any consistency, you become a scattered person and your life gets pulled in all kinds of directions. But if you learn how to focus on putting the desire for true happiness first, make up your mind you’re going to follow the steps no matter how long it takes. Then you’re not going to look down on the lower steps. All too many people want to go straight for all the upper steps. But first you’ve got to make a good foundation. The Buddha teaches you how to do that. And it begins right here. The skills of the breath, the skills of mindfulness. And you develop them not only through the meditation but also through observing the precepts, learning to be generous, all the good qualities that go with the path. All the things that are consistent with the desire to be truly happy and to be the kind of person who’s actually acting in that direction. This is what the skills can do for you. Keep your actions in line. Keep you in line. Make you a new person, a more consistent person, a person who doesn’t destroy the things that are in her best interest or her own best interest. And all your efforts head in the right direction. The direction that you may not have thought possible without these skills. But as the skills develop, you begin to realize you’re capable of more and more things. Capable of a more solid happiness, a more harmless happiness. So by taking refuge in the Buddha this way, you develop a refuge for yourself. You learn how to depend on yourself because you make yourself more dependable. That’s what the whole purpose of refuge is. You take the qualities of the Buddha and you make them your qualities. You develop the skills that he developed. You get closer to being the person he was and finding the happiness that he found. you

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