Playing with the Breath

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When you focus on the breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy in the body. Without that flow of energy, the air wouldn’t come in and out. And that energy actually starts in the body. So you can focus anywhere in the body where that movement starts. If it seems most prominent or it seems clearest to stay focused on, then ask yourself if it’s comfortable. And really look at it. If you’re not sure, you can try different kinds of breathing. Longer, shorter, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Make up your mind what feels good right now. One of the qualities of concentration is supposed to be ease, well-being. And it starts by developing some well-being in your breath. So find what the point of “just right” is right now and see how long you can maintain it. Sometimes it’ll change. In other words, what feels good right now may not feel quite so good five minutes from now. But five minutes from now, you can change. Try something else. Try to keep on top of this. And don’t regard it as a chore. Think of it as something you do for enjoyment. And John Fung used to say, “Play at the meditation.” That means both experiment and have a sense that it’s a game. You set up a few rules for yourself and see how well you can hold by them. Are you going to stay with the breath and not think about anything else? Or if other thoughts do come into mind, are you not going to follow them? And then see how long you can do that. And if you find that you stumble and fall and start thinking about other things, don’t get upset. Just start over again. Try to bring a light touch to this, because all too often you get frustrated. You envision great states of concentration and they don’t happen. Then you start saying, “Either there’s something wrong with the path, or there’s something wrong with me, or whatever.” And you’ve got to tell yourself, “This is something I can do. This is something I can do with a sense of enjoyment and see it as a game.” But the way you play this game, it’s like any sport. You take it seriously on the one hand, in other words, seriously enough to want to do it well, but then try to find some enjoyment in it, too. That gives you the strength to keep on going. Because when you start observing the breath in one part of the body, then the next thing is to try to observe it in other parts. And then you find that you can start using the breath to relieve different pains or patterns of tension in different parts of the body. And you begin to realize that once you get the skill of staying with the breath and having it comfortable, you’re learning to develop the right kind of focus. In other words, the focus that doesn’t clamp down on things, but the focus that just stays with something and allows it to develop. It’s like the focus of a hunter going through the forest. You’re focused on seeing everything in a wide range. You have a few ideas of what you’re looking for, but you’re not really sure where they’re going to be. So you open up the range of your awareness. Some people call it scattered focus, some people call it soft focus. You want to be aware of the whole body, and at the point where you’re putting yourself your most attention, you want it to be open. So whatever good energies might flow in from any direction, have the ability to flow in. You’re not blocking things off. In this way, the meditation becomes an enjoyable experience. That’s something you want to learn to keep in mind. When the breath feels good, it’s good for the body, it’s good for the mind. And if you’re not paying attention to it, it can get involved in strange cycles. But if you’re paying attention, you can break through any uncomfortable cycles, and you benefit. It’s a good skill to have because it gives rest to the mind and also strength to the mind. This is important because all too often we make ourselves up our minds we want to do something, but then we’re just too weak, either physically weak or mentally weak. The number one weakness in the mind is lack of mindfulness. You stay with something and then you forget. But here, as you stay with the breath and you get interested in the breath, the mindfulness begins to develop, even without having to think about it. Mindfulness here meaning keeping something in mind. That’s the Buddha’s original meaning for the term. And it’s necessary for concentration. So in the process of seeing the mind wandering off and catching it, you’re developing a very useful mental muscle. It’s all too easy to get frustrated. You make up your mind you’re going to be with the breath and three breaths later you’re someplace else. But the fact that you’ve known and noticed the fact that you’ve wandered off, that’s the beginning of mindfulness. That’s how mindfulness and alertness work together. Alertness is seeing what you’re doing right now, keeping track of the mind, keeping track of the breath in the present moment. Then when you realize that your alertness has slipped and your mindfulness has slipped, then you get right back. You keep doing this, and as long as you don’t get frustrated, you actually develop a skill. If you get frustrated, then the meditation is not developing concentration or developing alertness. It’s developing frustration, which is not what you want. So again, remember, this is a game. It’s a challenge. See it as a challenge that excites your interest. And you find that the more time you give to it, the better the results are going to be. This, like any skill, requires some commitment. As long as you see that it’s worthwhile, it’s easy to stay committed. When you don’t see the worth of doing any of this, then when the frustration comes, then you give up. This is why it’s important to realize not only how to meditate, but also why you’re meditating. We do this to get some control over the mind. I guess the mind is the most important thing in our lives. It directs all our other actions and affects everything else we’re going to be experiencing outside. It directs how we’re going to be engaging with other people and engaging with the world. So you want to get your mind in good shape. When you tell it to do something, you want it to do it. So you’re giving it something relatively neutral. You may wonder, “Why the breath?” Well, the breath is an important part of how we shape the present moment. The way you breathe is going to have an effect on the mind. And when the mind has an effect on the breath, it can turn into a very strong emotion. When anger comes in, it’ll have an effect on the breath. Lust comes in and has an effect on the breath. Greed. And then it’ll have an effect on the body. And then you’ll find yourself, say, when anger comes up, you have something in the body that you can’t stand, it doesn’t feel good, and you want to get it out. And all too often the way we get anger out of our system is to splash some on somebody else, which doesn’t help, which doesn’t really solve the problem. So, keeping watch of the breath, you’re staying at an important point. It’s where the body can have an effect on the mind and the mind can have an effect on the body. So you’re standing here at the gateway. And as long as the breath is good, then the effects that go in the different directions will be okay. In other words, when anger comes up, you can still breathe in a way that’s not going to create a sense of tightness or irritation or bottling something up inside. That puts you in a position where you can look at your anger with a little bit more objectivity, to see if it’s something you really should be getting angry about and if it’s something that needs to be done. You don’t let the anger get in the way of figuring out what would be a good thing to do, because that’s the problem with anger. It sees that something is wrong. But it’s not good at seeing whether its judgment is good. And then it’s a very bad judge of what’s going to be an effective way of solving the problem, if it really is a problem. So staying with the breath and keeping the breath calm in the midst of your anger gives you a place where you can step out of it and use your powers of judgment with a little bit more objectivity. And a little bit more ability to say no to crazy ideas that are coming up in the mind as to how to deal with a problem. So the breath is a good thing to get to know. As Ajahn Fuang said, “Something can take you all the way to nirvana.” This is a point that’s seconded in the Buddhist teachings. He teaches breath meditation with six steps. He says the sixteen steps can take you all the way to clear knowing and release. But they involve getting familiar with the breath. And as you get more and more familiar with the breath, you realize that your mind is right there. In this way you get to see the mind in action. You see how it’s not just the breath that’s shaping your experience of the present moment, but to a larger extent it’s the way the mind thinks about things. It’s the perceptions it holds. The Buddhist terms are bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself about things. What issues do you focus on? What do you tell yourself about them? You see that when you’re working with the breath. You’re focusing your attention on the breath, and as you’re evaluating it, you’re passing judgment, you’re asking questions, and you begin to see this process a lot more clearly. Then there are the perceptions that hold you with the breath. As we started out with perceiving the breath not just as air, but also as the movement of energy in the body. When you hold perception in mind, how does it change the way you breathe? How does it change the way you relate to the breath? You begin to see the power of perceptions. When you think of the breath not coming in from the outside but originating inside, what does that do? When you perceive the breath as something that can permeate the entire body, that goes through the nerves, goes through the blood vessels, hold that perception in mind and see what happens. It’s in this way that you begin to see how you’re shaping the present moment. So by staying anchored with the breath, which guarantees that you’ll stay in the present moment because there’s no past or future breath you can watch, then you’ve got all the present activities of the mind right here. When something comes up, you see what’s coming up along with it. This is where the Buddha has us look for the causes of things. We don’t have to trace things back to our childhood. Just ask yourself, when a particular thought comes in and the mind wants to go for it, why does it go for it? What’s coming up along with it? What is it telling itself when it says, “Go”? These things are there. The problem is that most of them are subconscious because they’re very subtle and the mind is rushing around. So it doesn’t have the precision with which to see the subtle. But if you can get the mind really still and strengthen it with a sense of ease and well-being, then you begin to see the little things that are running your mind, the ones that take over when you’re not paying attention or when you’re feeling weak. But now you’re stronger and you’re paying attention. They don’t have to take over. You’ve got other tools to use against them. So whatever other skills you plan to develop in life, make sure that at the very least you’ve got this skill as a foundation. Because it’s through this skill that you get to know your body from the inside, you get to know your mind. And those are the things you’re going to need for whatever other skill you’re going to master. You could say that this is the basic skill for learning how to live, because to live well requires that you have your mind under control and you know what it’s doing. So you can focus it in the direction you want. Otherwise, our desires pull us in all 180 degree directions. Then we get pulled here, pulled there, and we end up not accomplishing much of anything. But if you’ve got something that pulls you back into the center, then when something pulls you in another direction, you can ask, “Why?” Look at it and be able to resist the pull if it doesn’t seem like it’s going to be really that useful. So right here is where all the skills you’re going to need for living begin, or take their foundation. Just be careful when you’re talking about how important it is that you don’t get grim about it. Because one of the skills in life is learning how to enjoy what you’re doing. So always keep that skill in mind as well. Learn how to enjoy the breath. Learn how to enjoy all the different things you can do with the breath as you get to know it better. And you’ll find that breath meditation gives pleasure now and on into the future. Just pay careful attention to what you’re doing. And keep paying attention to what you’re doing, and the results will begin to come.

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