Who’s BreathingQ

September 29, 2018

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. Allow your attention to settle there, and then ask if it’s comfortable. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. This is one of the special aspects of the breath. It’s one of the few processes in the body that can go on automatically, or it can be willed. And we learn things from both sides. You want to learn how to focus on the breath in such a way and to breathe in such a way that creates a sense of well-being. And that way, the breath becomes yours. It’s a place where it feels good to stay. It keeps you in the present moment with a sense of well-being and a sense of stability so that you can watch your mind. One of the ways in which you watch the mind is when the mind starts going automatically, and there’s a sudden change. You can ask yourself, “Why the change? Was there a change in the body, or was there a change in the mind? Who’s doing the breathing?” When you’re intent on doing the breathing, it’s your awareness that’s doing it. It’s your desire to get the mind to settle down. It’s a good desire. But there are other desires that can take over the breath. Anger can take over the breath. Greed. Fear. And as they take over the breath, they’re in the position of strength. There’s a concept in Thai, “chayapum,” which literally means “the place of victory.” The closest we have in English is maybe “stronghold.” Think of an army deciding to do a battle with somebody else. You’re trying to put yourself in a position of strength. You look over at the landscape. Which part of the landscape is high ground? Which part of the landscape will be easiest to defend? That’s where you want to place your army. In the same way, whoever has the breath is in a position of strength. Because when anger is doing the breathing, it puts the body in a state where you feel you’ve got to get the anger out of your system. It’s hijacked the breath. And the parts of the mind that don’t want to go along with the anger are now in a position of weakness. The same with other unskillful emotions that come in and take over. When you’re afraid, when you’re panicked, you breathe in such a way that the panic wins. So you want to learn how to reclaim the breath. Put yourself in the position of strength. Make sure that wisdom, alertness, mindfulness, all the good qualities of the mind, they’re the ones that are doing the breathing. Because when you breathe with wisdom, you realize you want the mind to stay in the present moment so you can watch it. You don’t want it to be pushed out. That requires a sense of well-being. And how do you develop that sense of well-being? Through trial and error. You try different ways of breathing, different ways of thinking, about the breath. You can think about the breath as the air coming in and out through the nose. But you can also think of it as energy. And that energy can suffuse throughout the whole body. It runs along the nerves, runs along the blood vessels. There are spots in the body where the breath rests. In fact, you can think of the breath as the energy, and of course the energy doesn’t come from outside. It comes from within. The air comes from outside, but there’s an energy inside the body that pulls the air in. Where does that energy originate? You look into John Lee’s instructions. He talks about the spot just above the navel, at the tip of the breastbone, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. And those are just a few. When you breathe in, where does the energy seem to come from in the body? Is there anything getting in the way of it spreading smoothly? When you ask these questions and come up with answers, that’s when discernment is doing your breathing. And discernment has now the position of the stronghold. So try to keep this discernment as consistent as possible, so that nothing else slips in and takes over. Because when you can breathe calmly in the face of events that otherwise would get you upset, you begin to see the part of the mind that wants to get upset. But it’s now in a position of weakness. And when it’s in a position of weakness, you can understand it, see why the mind might like it and yet not want to go for it. You’ll be able to see the allure of this state of mind and at the same time see the drawbacks, so you can step back from it. One of the skills that’s necessary for this is the ability to make the distinction between the breath itself and the sense of pleasure that comes with the breath. Because it’s the pleasure that we’re here for. It’s what the mind wants. And it’s one of the things that makes concentration attractive, that sense of well-being that comes when the mind doesn’t have to run around all the time, when it can just stay settled. But if you just go for the pleasure, you’ve lost the breath. And when you lose the breath, then you either doze off or you go into a state that’s called delusion concentration, where everything is quiet but nothing’s very clear. So you have to gain some practice. Even though there’s a sense of pleasure that comes with the breath, you can’t focus directly on the pleasure. You have to focus directly on the breath. This allows you to pull back from the part of the concentration that you really are here for. And you train yourself to say, “If I want that pleasure, I have to work on the breath.” It’s a good lesson in cause and effect. And it’s a good lesson in ferreting out different things going on in the mind. So when you see the mind going off for some other pleasure, you can still step back because concentration gives you practice in stepping back. The pleasure is there. It surrounds you, but you’re still focused on the breath. You still hold on to that perception of breath. And as you hold on to that perception, it enables you to see the parts of the mind that want to go someplace else. And you don’t have to go running with them. You don’t have to abandon your stronghold. When you abandon the stronghold, they move in. They take it over. And then you feel compelled. As the Thais say, it squeezes your nerves. You feel compelled to follow them. Whereas when discernment is doing the breathing, you’re not their slave. You’re now in the position of control. So take the high ground. Take the stronghold. Defend it well. And you’ll be able to fend off greed, aversion, delusion, anger, fear, all the things that come sneaking in. They sneak in so thoroughly and so effectively that you think you’re the one who’s having the anger. It’s your anger. It’s your fear. Whereas when you meditate, you’re beginning to learn. You don’t have to identify with it. It can just be an event. And when it’s an event that doesn’t take over the breath, then you can understand it. You can look at it, see it for what it is, how it comes, how it goes. So the important thing is that you maintain this position of strength, this stronghold, this place of victory. That’s what the Buddha calls the path to unexcelled victory in battle. This is where you take your stance as you go into battle with the things that cause you to suffer inside the mind. Just make sure they don’t take over. Because you want to come out winning. (bell ringing)

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