Getting Out of Your Narratives

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You can keep the mind with a breath, with a sense of ease, well-being. It gives you a place where you can step out of the narratives of your life—the narratives about yourself, the narratives about the world around you. You can look at them with a lot more objectivity and not be so totally immersed in them. The problem is, when you can’t get the mind to stay with the breath, with a sense of well-being, it becomes a new narrative and hooks up with some of your old unhealthy narratives. This is why the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son. He didn’t start out with breath meditation right away. He taught him several other contemplations. The Buddha’s emphasis was less on getting the mind in concentration and more on just thinking about the world in new ways. One of the contemplations is the Brahmavara’s, developing goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy, equanimity for all. It gives you something to think about, to ask yourself, “What is goodwill?” What is a wish for goodwill? How is that best expressed? What does it mean to have goodwill for people you don’t like? So you’re thinking. You don’t have to judge whether you’re sticking with an object long enough, with enough sense of ease or comfort. You’re just thinking things through from the Buddha’s perspective. You realize that your life is shaped by your actions. So you need the goodwill. It’s not a question of other people deserving it or not deserving it. It’s good for you. You can trust yourself more if you can learn how to have goodwill for people you don’t like. At the same time, you’re not saying, “Well, may they be happy doing the horrible things they’re doing right now.” You’re saying, “May they understand the causes for true happiness and look at their own actions and see that something needs to be done.” That’s a thought you can have for anybody. Maybe you can turn around and think it for yourself. Because this is what all these contemplations are for. They give you a larger frame of reference. And then you look at your own stories within that frame of reference, and they take on a different cast, give you a different perspective. With immeasurable compassion, you think about all the people out there who are suffering. You begin to realize you’re not the only one. People with problems of all kinds. And you think about all the horrible problems that a lot of people are facing. At the very least, yours are not as bad. Even if yours are pretty bad. You’re not the only one. Again, that puts a different cast on things. There’s another contemplation. We have part of it in our chatting in the evening. Reflection on how aging, illness, and death are normal. That’s the Thai translation. We translate it in English. We’re subject to aging, illness, and death. Separation. And the Buddha said that that reflection, simply there, going that far, is a reflection on heedfulness. It makes you realize you don’t have anything else to hold on to except your actions. The body ages, grows ill, and dies. The people you love are going to be separated from you one way or another. All you’ve got to hold on to is your actions, so you want to be careful about them. That puts your relationships to your body and to others. You want to be in a new light. But then, in the sutta, the reflection goes beyond that. It reflects that all living beings are subject to aging, illness, and death. Separation. And all living beings have their actions. The Buddha said that gives rise to a sense of urgency, dismay. Realizing that no matter where you go, no matter what new lifetime you could aspire to, you’re going to have aging, illness, and death. And people are going to be continuing to create karma with their actions. And you can devote a whole lifetime to developing good actions and hope that you’re going to be reborn in a good place. And you get there and you forget. As the Buddha said, when you reflect on this, then the path gets born inside. Right view comes in. Right resolve comes in. The resolve that, “If I don’t get my act together, it’s going to be trouble.” But it is possible to get your act together. Think about all the people in the world whose lives are filled with problems, and they were able to do it. The Buddha’s only question is, “How much do you have to suffer before you’re willing to take delight in developing skillful qualities and take delight in abandoning unskillful ones?” He has the image of different kinds of horses. With one horse, all you have to do is whisper the word “whip” and it’ll obey. With other horses, you have to show the whip. With others, you have to tap them a little bit with the whip. With the next ones, you have to dig a little bit into the skin with the whip. With the other ones, you have to dig in deep to the bone before they’re ready to go. You’ve probably heard what they say in the A.A.A. that most people don’t really take their addiction seriously until they’ve hit rock bottom. It’s going to vary from person to person what constitutes rock bottom. But you have the choice. It’s not that you were born one kind of horse or another. You can choose what kind of horse to be. You can finally decide, “Okay, I really need to get my act together, and I don’t want to suffer anymore before I do.” And thinking this thought, after having thought about all living beings, makes it a different kind of thought. You realize that you’re in this together with a lot of other people. And you have your choice which kind of person you want to be, the kind of person who you see that there’s a problem but then doesn’t do anything about it, or the kind of person who wants to do something about it. And the next question is, if you want to do something about it, what way of thinking about it gets you feeling up for it? You hear some of the Thayajans talking about the practice as being a battle, or going into the ring with your defilements. You see who gets knocked out. Others talk about it as a game. “Make it your sport,” they say. You see aversion arising, and instead of identifying with it and saying, “This is me and this is my aversion,” just say, “Okay, there’s aversion there. How can I get around it?” In the same way as when you’re playing a sport, you see the enemy team has gotten a pretty strong position. There must be a way around it. This is where the practice differs from sports, because sometimes the enemy team has a pretty strong defense, or a pretty strong offense, and it’s hard to get around. But the Buddha said, “All your defilements are things that can be gotten around.” The question is, how do they do it? Other people have done it. There must be a way around it. John Lee tends to give images in his meditation, or in his dharma talks, that draw on skills and draw on making a game out of it. He says, “Make it your sport.” And that takes some of the seriousness out of the issue. And John Fuen would often say, “Make the breath your game. Learn how to play with it. But don’t play with it in the way of a little kid who plays with something and then loses interest and moves on to something else.” Say, “This is a game that you really want to master, and do your best to have fun while you’re doing it.” A lot of this involves learning how to talk to yourself. You settle down, you stay with the breath for three breaths. Then you’re off someplace else. Tell yourself next time, “Okay, at least I want to stay at a four the next time.” And then after four, then five. Approach it incrementally this way, and you find it becomes a lot more doable. Much better than setting up a huge goal for yourself that’s just going to make you feel like a failure when you can’t make it. Give yourself a goal that you think you can do. Aim for it. And then once you hit it, move it up a little bit, move it up a little bit. If you approach the meditation with a lightness of touch and a lightness in your mood, it makes it a lot easier to deal with the problems that come up. After all, what are we doing? We’re breathing. We’re learning how to breathe comfortably. You may wonder, “Why breathe comfortably?” Well, the way you breathe is going to have an impact on how your body feels, and how your body feels is going to have an impact on your mood. And your mood is going to have an impact on what you think, and what you think is going to have an impact on what you do. So why burden yourself with unnecessary heaviness in the present moment? And look at your perceptions of the breath. Breathe in. Ask yourself, “Which muscles in the body are doing the breathing? Where does the breath come in? Where does it go out?” How about reversing things, or how about moving things around a little bit, thinking of different places in the body where the breath can come in and go out? Or allowing the muscles that have been doing all the work a little time for rest. And then you ask yourself, “What other muscles can pitch in?” This way you make it a perception game and a breath game. And as you learn how to find some joy in developing this skill, the quality of willingness, the desire, you just come along without dropping to think about them too much. After all, here it is, your breath. You can do anything you want to with it. Here are your thoughts about the breath. You can do anything you want with it. And you can find that you enjoy the meditation. Then you’ve got that spot where you can step apart from your narratives. So to get there does require that you change the narratives a bit. So if you find that simply plunging into the breath or plunging into the concentration gets you discouraged, do a little of that thinking about goodwill, a little thinking about the universe as a whole, all living beings. Make that your escape from your narratives for the time being, until you learn to think about those things in ways that pull you back to the present moment, so you feel satisfied that this is a good place to be, a worthwhile place to be, an enjoyable place to be. Right here with the body and the mind, meet at the breath.

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