Basic Breath

June 14, 2019

Okay, sit up straight. Place your hands in your lap, close to the body, so that you’re not hunching over. Face forward. Close your eyes. That’s called getting into position. The next step is to get the mind into position as well. Think on those phrases we chanted just now about goodwill, “May all beings be happy.” Just hold that thought in your mind for a while, realizing that that’s your motivation for practicing. You want to find a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. Because if your happiness harms other people, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to try to destroy your happiness. So we’re looking for happiness that’s safe. A happiness that’ll last. And then we get to work. Focus on your breath. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Focus your attention there. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. You can try shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels good right now. When we talk about the breath here, it means not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the flow of energy that goes along with that. In fact, it’s the flow of energy that causes the air to come in and out. That’s the real breath energy in the body. We’re doing this because we want to give the mind a comfortable place to stay. Because if we’re going to look for happiness, it’s going to depend on our actions. And for actions to be wise, to be able to take the long-term into account, we have to have a sense of well-being right now. Unfortunately, the breath is right here. You don’t have to take it from anyone else. You don’t have to borrow it. You don’t have to buy it. It’s free. It comes in, goes out. It’s simply a matter of watching over it. And you see that it’ll have a good effect on the body if you pay more attention to it. If your mind wanders off, you bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged. The fact that you catch it is a good sign. When you bring it back, don’t drag it back. Just let it come back naturally. And try to breathe in a way that feels especially good. It’s a reward for coming back. Think of parts of the body that don’t get nourished by the breath energy, and breathe in a way that gives them some nourishment. That way, sitting here with your body and the breath in the present moment becomes a lot more comfortable. And it gets interesting. You begin to realize there are patterns of tension in different parts of the body. If you can think of breathing in a way that dissolves those patterns of tension, it’s going to be good for the body and for the mind. It’s good for the body in the sense that it opens up the circulation to parts that have been squeezed off. It’s good for the mind because it gives it a more and more comfortable place to stay, while at the same time developing its powers of sensitivity. You want to make your mind sensitive to what it’s doing, what’s going on in the present moment. The Buddha calls this alertness. Because part of things that are happening in the present moment are things that come in from your past karma, and some of them are from your present karma. And it turns out that your present karma, in other words, the decisions you’re making right now, are the important ones. The fact that we live this human life, we’re on this human level, means that we have a mixture of good and bad karma in our backgrounds. It’s common for everybody. Some of their good karma is showing now. Other people, some of their bad karma is showing now. What you see right now, though, is not an indication of everything that’s there in your background. It’s not like you have a single karma account and what you see is the running balance. You have lots of different karmic seeds. And the seeds from your past karma are going to ripen at different times. And you want to have a skill that prepares you so that you don’t have to suffer, even if bad karma seeds come up. This is what the Buddha is offering you. You get more sensitive to what your mind is doing to shape the present moment in the way you think, in the way you perceive things. He says you can do it in a way that’s so skillful that you don’t suffer at all, no matter how bad things are coming at you. So this is what the Buddha is offering you. This is an important skill to master. It’s like you have protection wherever you go. This, the Buddha said, was one of his duties as a teacher. He said, “Every teacher has a duty to protect the student.” That doesn’t mean you go running around and fighting off the student’s enemies. It means the teacher should give the student a skill that the student can then use for protection. This is what the Buddha is doing. He teaches us generosity, he teaches us virtue, he teaches us meditation, all for this purpose. When you’re generous, you create a broad state of mind, an expansive state of mind. It feels good to be a generous person. The same way when you’re virtuous. Virtuous here means that you make the resolve that you’re not going to harm anyone. You’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal, have illicit sex, you’re not going to lie. You’re not going to take intoxicants. And you can maintain that determination. It feels good to be able to carry it through. The mind feels at ease with itself. Even more so as you meditate. You develop a sense of well-being simply by the way you breathe. Notice anger comes into the mind. There’s going to be tension someplace, maybe in your stomach, maybe in your chest. We breathe easily through that, and the tension will dissolve away. Then that sense that you’ve got to take the anger out on somebody gets a lot weaker. At the same time, you’re not bottling it up. You can look at the situation with a lot more calm, a lot more clarity. This is a good skill to have, being sensitive to how the breath energy goes in the body and learning how to use that knowledge. Because, as I said, we’ll need it in this lifetime. It would be nice to be able to say, “May you forever be well,” and have it stick. But here we are on the human plane. And the reason we’re here is because we’ve got a mixture. So what we need is a skill like the skill that the Buddha gives us. We need to get some mastery over our minds so that the minds don’t create suffering. It turns out that that’s the suffering that makes the mind itself suffer, the suffering that it’s causing. The suffering that comes from unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, unpleasant events outside, unpleasant intentions from other people. That does not have to make the mind suffer. Even things happening in the world happening in your own body, they don’t have to make you suffer. There’s a disease, an illness, pain. The mind does not have to suffer from these things if you have skill. This is the skill that the Buddha is teaching. It’s a skill in how to get all the different members of your mind. It’s like your mind is like a committee. Make sure they all behave themselves and they’re all actually helpful. Because they understand what happiness is, they understand that you want happiness that doesn’t harm anyone. And when you can get everybody in agreement like that, which is one of the reasons why we meditate, then there’s no fifth column inside. The fifth column is a bunch of spies from the other side that pretend to be on your side, but they’re not. We have a lot of those in our mind. Greed tells us to do things, and then when we do it we regret it, but the greed has gone away. Anger tells us to do things, we follow the anger, but then the anger goes away. In the meantime, we’re left with the bad results of what we did. It’s like someone who comes in and tells us to go break a window with a brick, and then they go running off. The cops catch us because we did what they told us to do. But they get off scot-free. So you want to watch out for that side of your mind, because that’s the side that’s going to cause you suffering. The good side of the mind is the one that says, “Hey, we want long-term happiness. We want harmless happiness.” And so the Buddha’s giving you the skill so that this side of the mind can get stronger, and so that we don’t cause us suffering. This is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he teaches us a skill to protect us from ourselves. He teaches us a skill so that our goodness can survive, even in this world where things are good and bad. And there’s a tendency, when things are bad, for the mind to get bad, too. But here we’re learning how to strengthen the mind so that, no matter what we do, we can survive. No matter how bad things get outside, the mind is still fine. When the mind is fine, then it doesn’t suffer. And when it’s not suffering, the problems of the world don’t touch it. The mind has its own safe place. And so the instructions on how to do this are the Buddha’s gift to us. We, however, have to do this ourselves. We have to develop the skill ourselves. It requires that we be alert to what we’re doing. We keep his instructions in mind. That’s mindfulness. And then we try to do it well. It’s called ardency, when you really put your heart into it. When these qualities in your mind are strong, then your mind can depend on itself. When you can depend on yourself, you’re fully self-aware. You’re safe. All the things in your life that matter are safe.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2019/190614_Basic_Breath.mp3>