Focusing on the Breath to Learn about the Mind

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The Buddhist teachings are all about putting an end to suffering. So what are we doing sitting here watching the breath? It’s because the causes for suffering come from the mind. We can think of lots of pains and injustices out there in the world. But those, the Buddha said, are the result of the suffering we cause in the mind. They’re the tail end. The suffering in the mind is what causes people to act in unskillful ways, which is why society is so full of injustices. But if we’re going to cure those problems, we have to turn and look inside. Because each of us has only one mind that we’re responsible for, this one right here. And we bring it to the breath so that we can get to know it, the “it” here meaning the mind. And we’ll be learning something about the breath. In fact, we’ll be learning quite a lot about the breath. You know when it comes in, you know when it goes out. If you watch it for a while, you begin to gain a sense of when it’s comfortable and when it’s not. And you realize also that you can change it if it’s not comfortable. Make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. It’s good to start with some really deep, long, in-and-out breaths to begin with, to kind of air things out inside, and also to emphasize the sensation of the breathing. Then when the mind begins to pay attention here and calm down some, then you can let the breath find whatever rhythm feels good right now. Think of the breath as a whole body process. Think of every cell breathing in, breathing out, the breath energies running along the nerves, running along the blood vessels. Hold that image in mind. It makes it easier to stay. But you begin to notice that in staying with the breath, the problem is not the breath, it’s the mind. The breath doesn’t go running away to the past, it doesn’t go running away to the future, it doesn’t go running away to the other side of the world. The mind can do those things, and does. And the problem is that it often doesn’t know what it’s doing. You’re sitting here with the breath, and all of a sudden you’re off someplace else. And you have no idea what happened in the meantime. But you come back, and then it happens again, and you come back again. You have to make up your mind. You’re going to look for the signals to tell you when the mind is about to go. And over time, you’ll get quicker and quicker at seeing the different stages by which the mind decides to leave the breath and go running off, and how it likes to hide those decisions from itself. When you can see that, you’ve peeled away some of the layers of the curtains that hide things inside. That’s precisely what we’re here for. So if you have trouble staying with the breath, don’t think you’re the only person in the world who has that trouble. Everybody who’s started meditating finds that the mind does things that they don’t know why or what it’s doing. That, the Buddha said, is the cause of suffering—the fact that the mind doesn’t know itself. And the Buddha gives us a vocabulary for understanding what’s going on. He uses the word “fabrication,” sankhana in Pali. It means the mind’s tendency to put things together, particularly to formulate intentional acts. So when the mind goes off without your knowing it, it’s not that there was no intention there. There was an intention, but it was hidden. So we’re trying to bring these processes of intentions up to the surface. The Buddha says there are three kinds you want to watch out for. One is the breath itself. That’s a bodily fabrication. And then there’s verbal fabrication. Talk to yourself. The doctrinal terms are directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath, breath, breath, come back to the breath, and then you evaluate it. What kind of breathing would feel good now? And then when you’ve breathed that particular way for a while, does it really feel good? If it does feel good, what do you do to make the most of that sensation of good breathing? This is where the perception comes in. And this is the third type of fabrication, mental fabrication, which are feelings and perceptions. You have a feeling of ease. You have a perception of it flowing through the body. So those are the kinds of fabrications you have to watch out for. And this quality of watching out, that’s called alertness. That’s what you’re trying to develop. You’re exercising your alertness to watch the mind. You watch the mind as it’s trying to stay with the breath, and you’re alert to what it’s doing. And if it wanders off, you bring it back. And you ask yourself, “Okay, what was the problem?” Was it the problem with the breath? Was it the problem with how you were talking to yourself? Was it the problem with the feeling? Sometimes when there’s a feeling of ease, we just kind of blur into that feeling of ease and forget the breath. The mind is really avid for finding any sensations of pleasure it can find, and then wallowing in them. And then if you’re wallowing in them, though, you’ve lost the cause for why they were pleasant to begin with. An image that Jon Stewart used to use was water buffaloes. They like to drink clean water, but when they get a little puddle of water, what do they do? They lie in it. It gets all muddy. Then they have to go look for another one to drink. So you have to watch out for the mind to wallow in the water of its cool or pleasant sensations, because then you ruin them. At least when you notice this, you’ve learned a lesson about the mind. It may not be a lesson you wanted to learn, but it’s teaching you something you didn’t know about the mind. So it’s all to the good that you would notice these things and then come back. Because the whole point of this is to get you sensitive to what your mind is doing. The choices it’s making, the things it’s putting together, the way it’s putting things together. Because it does this not only while you’re watching the breath. This is how it functions all the time. Your mind has these long conversations, and they wander in strange places. Then a little thought note suddenly turns into something else. If you were to try to trace back what you’ve been thinking about for the past ten minutes, especially if you haven’t been meditating, you find that it’s a real act of willpower to try to remember, “Why did you go from this thought to that thought, and from that thought to this thought?” You can see how arbitrary some of those modulations are. So you’re trying to get back to the point where you can watch the mind. And if you see that it’s heading off in the wrong direction, you can head it right back to the breath. Now, working with the breath and making it comfortable, that’s one of the ways of getting you interested in the breath. So it’s not sheer willpower that’s keeping you here. You realize that if the breath flows smoothly throughout the body, it’s going to be good for the health of the body. And it’s certainly going to make it easier to sit here. You can check your posture. Which muscles are pulling you out of a comfortably erect posture? Which muscles are making it hard for your legs to stay in a cross-legged position? Can you relax those muscles? Can you breathe in a way that allows them to stay relaxed? That’s the way your health improves, your posture improves, and you’re getting to observe the mind as you’re working with the issues in the body. There are some schools of thought that have you focus directly on the mind itself, and they’re complaining about breath meditation as well. When you die, you’re going to lose your breath. So you’re going to lose the object of your meditation. So why bother focusing there to begin with? Well, one, it’s hard to focus directly on the mind in and of itself to begin with. You need something else to look at first. But secondly, if you want to see these processes of fabrication, the breath is a great place to look at them, because it’s the way the mind fabricates things. It’s not going to leave that behind. The things it fabricates are going to be left behind. But the mind’s process to keep on building things and putting them together and letting them fall apart and then trying to build something new out of the old pieces, that’s what keeps you going from one life to the next to the next. So working with the breath allows you to see these processes in action, learn how to become alert to them so you can gain more control over them. And particularly when you begin to see what the mind is doing to contribute to its own stress and suffering. So trying to keep the mind focused on one thing is a really good way of seeing the movements of the mind that would pull you away from that one thing. And try to stay focused on a sense of well-being, creating a sense of well-being inside. It gets you more and more sensitive to subtle levels of stress that the mind is creating. So this is why, if we want to know more about and understand the suffering that the mind is causing itself, the breath is a good place to start. And to stay.

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