You’ve Got a Friend

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When you’re not feeling well, it’s always good to remember that you’ve got a friend in the breath. It can be your medicine, at the very least, to make sure that your mind isn’t sick. The body may be sick, but the mind isn’t sick. That’s an important principle. The Buddha mentioned that one time. One of his students had been sick, and as he was recovering, he came to see the Buddha. That’s what the Buddha told him. Even though the body may be sick, make sure that your mind isn’t sick. That lifted the man’s spirits. Then he went to see Venerable Sariputta. Sariputta said, “You look like you’ve just had an experience of a Dhamma talk from the Buddha. What did he say?” So the man told him. Sariputta asked him, “Did you ask him the Buddha what he meant by that?” The man said, “No.” So Sariputta explained, “What does it mean for the mind not to be sick? In ultimate terms, it means that you don’t hold on to the five aggregates in any way that would create a sense of self around them, which holds a high standard for what it means for the mind to be well. But you can work in that direction.” The breath is one of the tools, one of the medicines, for the mind. It can help get the mind to a place where it’s not affected by the ups and downs of the body, the ups and downs of your thoughts, your feelings, your perceptions, even your awareness of things. It’s good to remember that the breath, of course, is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the movement of energy in the body. We have this tendency to think of our awareness of the body as primarily being solid, and then the breath is something that we pull in. That’s not necessarily the best image to hold in mind, because actually the breath is closer to your awareness than the solid parts of the body. It’s because of the breath that you can move the body around. It’s because of the breath that you can sense the body. So say there’s a feeling of tiredness, of aches down through your torso. In this particular case, it may not be the solid part that comes first to mind. It’s the aches and the pains. But try to think of the breath as prior to that. Then think of the breath energy flowing down through where the aches and pains are, and then down past them, through them, past them, out your feet. Make sure the breath comes first, prior to the aches and pains. And even if that part of the body doesn’t feel like there’s much breath going on, ask yourself, if it were breath, would it feel good? What would make it feel better? How would it flow better? What direction would it feel good to flow? And as the breath flows in those different parts of the body, you have a sense that you’re energizing, you’re waking up those parts of the body. That’s all that’s good. In John Lee’s images of extending electric wires around the house and having lights, you run electricity through the wire, you energize the wire, you wake up the wire, and the lights turn on. The same way you energize the body as you focus primarily on the breath. Because of the different properties—energy, warmth, coolness, solidity—the breath is what governs the others. So take advantage of the fact that it’s as close as you can get to the mind. In fact, it’s where the mind and the body meet. And it’s in this way that your determination to not be a victim of the pain—even though the pain may be there, you don’t have to be a victim of it—let that determination come first. Then use the breath as your medicine. Because we’re not here just to accept things as they are. We’re here to push against them a little bit. After all, the Buddha says our experience is shaped by our actions, by our intentions. And you’re not going to see that unless you change your intentions and see to what extent you can make a difference right here, right now. Now the pains and the aches may not go away, but the purpose of this doesn’t have to be to make them go away, although sometimes they will happen. You improve the breath energy in parts of the body, and they just feel better. But the real purpose of all this is to be able to be with aches and pains and not suffer from them, not have them invade the mind. And if you sit here simply accepting and being a victim of them, that means they’ve invaded, they’ve trampled all over you. You undertake a more proactive stance. You’re here to heal things to whatever extent you can. And even if the body doesn’t heal, or at least not right away, the fact that the mind is stronger means that the illness of the body doesn’t have to make inroads on the mind. And that’s the skill the Buddha teaches. We have those chants every night. We’re subject to aging, illness, and death. The world is swept away. It does not endure. We have nothing of our own. And then there’s the other chant, “May I be happy.” So we admit that there are drawbacks in the world. The world is not a perfect place. Your body is not a perfect body. Nobody has a perfect body. But you don’t have to suffer because of those things. And you learn how not to suffer because you have the proper medicines. You have the proper tools. You have the skills that come from knowing how to think of different parts of the body, be aware of different parts of the body, and think of the breath, either following your awareness as awareness goes down the body, or you can think of the breath preceding your awareness. It’s already there. And it’s the combination of breath and awareness that actually acts as medicine. In traditional Thai medicine, they have a theory that you have medicinal plants that have a medicinal quality, and then you have a solvent that allows that medicinal quality to go to the organs where it’s needed. And so in the John Lee’s image, your conscious awareness here is the actual medicine. The breath is the solvent. It’s what allows the awareness to seep down through the body, down through the bloodstreams, down through the nerves. It’s nourishing things, healing things, soothing things. So there may be pains, but you don’t have to be victimized by them. You’ve got skills. You’ve got medicine. You’ve got a friend here in the breath. Those with any friendship, it’s going to take time for this friendship to develop. You have to be observant. You have to ask questions. You have to try different activities out with a friend to see what the friend likes to do, what the friend is capable of doing, where you can trust the friend, where you can’t trust the friend. So you’re trying to develop a friendship with the breath. It’s going to take some time. You’re going to be observant. But this is the best friend of all. It’s right here with the breath in the body, in the mind. It’s where all these things come together. So give the breath priority. Think of going down the entire nervous system, going down the entire circulation system. Each breath coming in and going out, every part of the body gets bathed. It’s healing. It’s medicine. It wakes up the sluggish parts of the body and gets them to work better. It dissolves through the pain, wherever the pains may be. There’s one problem when you think of the pain as being a solid block. When you think of it as being porous, the breath can go through anything. It helps to loosen up your perceptions on the pain, that it has a certain shape, that it’s in a certain location, that it has certain boundaries. Just make sure the quality of the breath is good. As I said, if you don’t feel breath as such yet, ask yourself, “If this were breath, what would a good breath feel like here right now?” See what happens. See what you can do. At the same time, make sure that the quality of your focus is helpful. You can have either a scatter focus, where you’re centered and your awareness spreads out from the center, or you can try a focused one point, especially at parts where there seems to be a blockage. See if that one point can, again, disperse the blockage. There are ways you can adjust your focus, ways you can adjust the breath, all of which can be medicine, both for the body and for the mind. As I said, if the effects in the body are not immediately apparent, at the very least your mind will be put in a better place. It’s no longer sitting there just victimized by the pain, victimized by the illness. It’s more proactive. It has energy resources inside that you can draw on. So even though you may seem to be alone with your illness, remember, you’ve got a friend. There’s that image in the canon of a king who’s sick. His courtiers are standing around and it sounds like they’re actually hopeful that this time he may die. And there’s a monk who’s talking to the king at another time. He says, “Back in the time when you were sick, could you tell those courtiers to share out part of the pain so that you would feel less pain?” Of course not. You can’t even tell your relatives, your closest members of your family, that they can’t share out the pain for you. But the breath is right here in the body and it can disperse some of the pain. At the very least, make sure the mind isn’t pained. So it’s not only medicine, but it’s also the best kind of friend of Goodbye.

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