A Fever in the Breath

October 8, 2022

The Buddha notes that there are times when you’re trying to get the mind to settle down in the establishing of mindfulness, the body, feelings, mind, mental qualities. And as he said, there’s a fever in the breath, say, or a fever in the body, or a fever in the mind. It just doesn’t want to settle down. In cases like that, he says, try to find an inspiring theme, something that the mind would be happy to think about. He doesn’t give any specific recommendations, but there are lots of other concentration themes that you can try out. In a John Lee’s image, the breath is home, but nobody stays home all the time. After all, you have to go out and find your food. You have to have a range. So there are times when you take out your range meditations, whatever’s needed to get the mind to be willing to settle down, or whatever’s needed to deal with a particular defilement that’s come up. So it’s good to have a range. It’s good to have a repertoire. Good thing about the Buddha and the Dharma, the Sangha. Think about whatever you find inspiring about the Buddha. The fact that he was wealthy but was able to give up all of his wealth. Or the fact that he had undergone all those austerities. And usually when people undergo austerities like that, there’s a certain amount of pride. As he noted, there was a certain conceit that when he’d reached the end of six years, he had gone beyond anything anybody else had ever done. If he went any further, though, he’d die. This is obviously not the way. But it was another way. He recalled the time when, as a child, he’d spontaneously enter the first jhana. Could that be the way? And something inside him said yes. Why am I afraid of that? The pleasure of that state? He thought about it. There’s really nothing to be afraid of. It didn’t intoxicate the mind. It certainly didn’t involve any harm to anybody. But his body was so emaciated at that point that he couldn’t get into that kind of concentration, so he had to eat more. The five brethren who’d been looking after him got disgusted and went away. And he didn’t let that deter him. So both his willingness to give up his pride to the point where the people who’d been serving him said, okay, that’s it, we’re done. He didn’t let that deter him. You might find that inspiring. Or the fact that he gained awakening at that point. He didn’t owe anything to anybody else. Yet he decided to teach. He taught for forty-five years. You read in the suttas and you see he had enough difficulties dealing with members of other sects who would come and argue with him. There’s one case where this one guy leaves home in the morning and says, I want to find somebody to argue with. First contemplative I meet up with, I’m going to argue. Whatever he says, I’m going to say the opposite. People like that. Yet the Buddha was able to convert them. And then you read in the Vinaya, all these people supposedly were his followers, doing all kinds of inappropriate things. He had to deal with that. He was untiring and patient. He did what needed to be done. He had lots of things to think about in terms of his compassion, his wisdom, his purity. You find that inspiring. Think about that for a while until the mind is ready to settle back down with the breath. You can think about the Dharma, about how insightful it is. Now it’s a total training for the heart and the mind. It asks only the most noble things out of us. It’s a path toward dignity. I think I’ve mentioned this story. When I first came back to America, I was teaching a group up in Orange County. One evening I happened to mention dignity as part of the training. A woman in the group came up afterwards. She was from Russia. She said she’d been in America ten years at that point. She had a few classes in Russia, but she’d never heard it used here in America. If you stop and think, that looking for dignity is something counter-cultural now. But that’s what the path is. The path always has been counter-cultural in a lot of ways. It asks us to take a noble attitude toward our craving, a noble attitude toward our clinging, a noble attitude toward what we like, the things we prefer, that we’re really attached to, and saying, “Step back from those attachments for a while. Just look at them. Work your way free of them.” It’s that kind of Dharma. There’s the Sangha, all the people from all backgrounds, all ages. In some cases, if you looked at them, you wouldn’t say there was much potential. If the Buddha was able to find their potential, teach them, so that they were able to gain awakening too. You think about that, and you say, “Well, they could do it. I can do it as well.” Those are some ways you can get the mind inspired. You can think about your own generosity to the times you’ve been good. Because sometimes what’s keeping the mind back is the sense that you’re a miserable sinner, you have no hope. You think about the good things you’ve done in terms of generosity, in terms of virtue, and you realize you do have goodness. You see yourself making mistakes, both in the meditation and in life. And it’s good to remind yourself, “Well, you have done things well. If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here meditating.” So those are some things you can think about. You think about the qualities of mind that make a person into a deva. There’s conviction, virtue, generosity, learning, discernment. You have some of those qualities. They may not be fully developed, but you’ve got some. So you have that potential as well. You can think of the brahma-viharas. I was saying today that you usually think of those at the beginning of the meditation and at the end. But there are times sometimes in the middle, in the Buddhist terms, when there’s a fever. “No, I just do not want to settle down with the breath.” Anything but the breath, okay? Think of the thoughts of goodwill, goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Think about what that means. When you have goodwill for somebody, you’re wishing that that person understands the causes for it to happen. In other words, acting on skillful intentions. It doesn’t just sit with that knowledge. It actually tries to put it to use. So you might think about what ways you could show goodwill for yourself, what activities you could do, which would actually be an expression of goodwill. You can read in the Gardener Meta Sutta, there’s a whole list of things, ways of living, that are in line with the desire that all beings be happy. Then when you meet up with beings who are suffering, goodwill turns into compassion. It turns into empathetic joy. You learn how not to look down on the people who are suffering and how not to resent the people who are happy, especially the ones who have something that you would like to have but you don’t have. You don’t resent that. You’re not jealous of them. You have the largeness of heart to realize you have all kinds of good things in the world and there’s more than enough for everybody. It’s not the case that somebody else’s good fortune decreases yours. But here you are, wishing all beings to be happy because I hear somebody who’s happy. It’s a test for the honesty of your goodwill. But then you have to remember that despite all the goodwill you might have for people, whether they’re going to be happy or not depends on their actions. I know a lot of people who, either because of past karma or present karma, are just not going to work in that direction. That’s where you have to have equanimity. Realize that we live in a world where people have freedom of choice. This is what freedom of choice looks like. And you find with each of these themes that you can use them as a means to get back to the breath. You think about the qualities of the Buddha. Well, where did the Buddha develop those qualities at the breath? Where does the Dharma point you? It points you to the Noble Eightfold Path. What’s the heart of the path? Concentration. How do you get the mind in concentration? You practice right mindfulness. The members of the Sangha, how did they gain awakening? Well, they were able to gather their minds together and settle down. They’re like a deva. Those are good, but they’re not totally safe. They become safe when you develop the mind in concentration. Same with the Brahma-viharas. If you want to make them universal, you have to be able to think of them all around, all around, all around. That expands the mind. That’s called bhagatam citam, or apamanam citam. And it leads to states of concentration. So ideally, the thinking you do should get the mind in the right mood. As the Buddha said, you’ve worked on these themes until the mind is ready to settle down. And then it can settle down with the breath, say. You’re just there with the breath. The thinking puts you in the right mood, calms down the fevers in the body or in the mind. So when you feel ready, just come back to the breath and just settle in. One of the images the Buddha gives is a wild elephant that’s been caught. He’s brought into the city. He’s tied to a post, and that’s the last place he wants to be. But they do what they can to make him see that there are pleasures of civilization. They try to give him food. There was even a custom back in those days that you would play flute music for elephants. When the elephant finally accepted the food, they knew he was going to survive. So you’re content to be there. You’re learning basically how to civilize your mind. And there are times when it will rebel and go back to its old forest ways. But you should get more and more used to the pleasures of either the inspiring themes of meditation or just the breath itself. And then the mind becomes more tame and capable of doing work. The important part of concentration is that you like the theme that you’re with. When you suddenly find that the mind is rebelling against the theme that you’re with, well, give it another theme for a while, but one that will bring it back. It may take a while. The Buddha doesn’t say 10 minutes, 15 minutes. Sometimes it’s whole sessions of meditation. But ultimately it’s thinking that brings you back to a point where you don’t have to think. You just settle in right here. Be here at your ease. You’ve worked off the fevers. You’ve worked off the excess energy. Now is the time to be still.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/221008_A_Fever_in_the_Breath.mp3>