Don’t Take This Breath for Granted

November 5, 2022

The whole idea of searching for the Dhamma came to the young prince who eventually became Buddha. When he reflected on his attitude towards people who were old, sick, dead, he realized that he had a tendency to look down on them, that it wasn’t appropriate, because he himself was going to someday grow old, get sick, and die. And he wondered, “Is there anything that doesn’t grow old, get sick, and die?” If there was, that would be a good thing to search for. So at that point he had no guidance, but simply the desire not to be subject to these things. It’s quite a leap of the imagination. Most of us simply accept life as it is. We may not like the idea of growing old, getting sick, dying, but for most of us we just learn to accept it, put up with it, and try to find what happiness we can find in avoiding these things as best we can. But the whole message of the Buddha’s life, the Buddha’s teachings, is that it is possible to find something that doesn’t grow old, doesn’t get sick, doesn’t die. So it’s worth keeping that in mind as we practice. At the same time, we have to keep death in mind. Not to be morose or to be depressed, but to keep death in mind. It’s just simply to remind ourselves that there’s a lot that we take for granted, a lot of opportunities to do good in the mind that we don’t take advantage of. As the Buddha said, when you reflect properly on death, it leads to the deathless, because it induces you to remember that each breath you have is a breath that you can do something good with. This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha focused on the breath to begin with. Because when you’re with the breath, you’re with the present moment. There’s no past breath you can watch, no future breath you can watch. You’re only with the breath right here, right now. And when you’re here right now with the breath, you’re also here right now with the present moment in your mind. You’re not wandering off to past or future, or if you are, you’ve left the breath. So try to stay anchored right here. Look at what’s going on in your mind. The Buddha started out on the path after many false starts. He said he finally got on the right path when he learned to divide his thoughts into two sorts, those that were skillful and those that were unskillful. The skillful ones were based on renunciation, non-ill-will, harmlessness. The unskillful ones were based on sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness. So he just decided to divide his thoughts into two, not in terms of what he’d like to think about or what his real thoughts were about something, but more, where did these thoughts lead and where did they come from? How did they function as part of a causal process? In the case of the skillful thoughts, he would allow them free range. In the case of the unskillful thoughts, he said he would treat them as a cow herd would treat its cows during the rice-growing season. That would be a time when it would be the danger that the cows would get into the rice, eat the rice, and then there would be problems with whoever’s rice field they got into. So he would have to check them, keep them in line. In other words, he didn’t simply accept the fact that there was something unskillful going on in the mind. He tried to put a stop to it. He tried to do it in a way that was effective. A lot of us have had bad experiences trying to put a stop to unskillful thoughts simply because we don’t know how to do it. But there are effective ways of doing it, and one of them is to simply replace them with skillful thoughts. He said when the mind was dealing with skillful thoughts, he would treat them the same way a cow herd would treat its cows during the dry season. The rice had been gathered, the rice grains had been threshed, they were safely away in their barns. Now the cows could wander wherever they wanted to and they wouldn’t get into trouble. So he would allow skillful thoughts to wander wherever they liked. But then he realized after a while that even skillful thoughts, when you think them, can be tiresome. If you’re able to think skillful thoughts twenty-four hours a day, you start getting tired. When the mind gets tired, it’s very easy to go back to unskillful thoughts. So he realized he needed first to teach his mind how to rest. That’s what concentration practice is for, to give the mind a resting place so it can do its work well. We don’t rest simply to rest and think that’s the end of the problem. We rest because we know there’s work to be done. Some of the forest Dajans talk about finding the right balance between resting the mind and then doing work of discernment. The Buddha himself talks about how sometimes you need to do discernment work first and then you allow the mind to rest. Sometimes you need to get the mind to rest and then you can do your discernment work. Sometimes you can do the two together. You can try to be really discerning about what needs to be done to get the mind to settle down. People who tend to think a lot, like most Westerners, really need to do that last type. If the mind is not willing to settle down, you have to ask why. And then you can begin to figure it out, whether it’s a problem with the breath or a problem with the thoughts you’ve carried in from the day. You’ve learned something important about cause and effect in the mind. If the problem is with the thoughts, the Buddha gives a whole series of ways of dealing with them. The first is simply, as soon as you realize that you’ve wandered away from the breath, just come back. You catch yourself wandering off in a different direction, well, come back. But if you find that you keep going to one particular thought, then you have to start thinking about the drawbacks of that thought. On the one hand, “What is the allure? Why do you like it?” And you compare the allure with the drawbacks. And you realize it’s not worth it. And sometimes that’ll be enough to bring the mind back. Other times it’s not. The mind just wants to think. In which case you say, “Okay, you can think, but it’s not me thinking. Just think of it as just part of the mind. You can think of the mind as a committee, that those committee members talk as much as they want, but you’re not going to get involved in the conversation.” And then you begin to notice that when you’re thinking thoughts that are distracting like that, there’s a certain amount of tension that builds up in the body. Certain thoughts will have a pattern of tension maybe in the arm or in the leg or someplace in your face, back of the neck. If you notice that there’s some tension related to a particular thought, think of dissolving that tension. Then the thought will disappear. It won’t have any place to stand. And if none of these methods work, then the Buddha says, “Put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, clench your teeth, and just tell yourself, ‘I will not think that thought.’” The forester jhans recommend using a meditation word, “rapid fire,” here, like a machine gun. “Buddho, buddho, buddho,” is one that they like. Now that’s a method that you can use only for a limited amount of time. But often it’s enough to clear the air. One of these five methods will work. Then you become, as the Buddha said, someone who’s in charge of your thinking. All too often we let our thinking take charge. Our thoughts run wherever they want to go. But if you begin to exercise some control over them like this, then that aspect of getting the mind to settle down in the present moment becomes a lot easier to handle. The other source of difficulty in settling down, of course, may be with the breath itself. You ask yourself, “What is uncomfortable in the breath right now? Is it in too long or out too long? Is it in too short or out too short? Is it too heavy or too light? Is it too fast or too slow? Is it too deep or too shallow?” You can experiment with different kinds of breathing. The problem is the way you image them. Imagine the breath to yourself. What is your mental picture of how the breath comes into the body, how it goes out, and what sensations you need to have for it to come in, what sensations you need to have for it to go out? And are those sensations really necessary, or is it something the mind has made up? If the sensations are uncomfortable, relax them and see if you can still breathe. And you can. So there’s plenty to explore right here, right now, to get the mind to settle down. You start figuring out what the problems are. And this way, the meditation becomes more and more of a skill. And as the mind settles down, then if there’s any little blip of a thought here, blip of a thought there, breathe right through it. Because there still will be the temptation to go thinking other things. The mind is strange. It wants to have a sense of ease and well-being, but then it gets a sense of ease and well-being, and after a while it gets bored. It wants to think about something new. What’s next? What’s over here? What’s over there? And you have to keep reminding it. This is a skill. You’re working at the skill of learning how to really be still. Because the more you can keep the mind still, the more you can see subtle things that are happening. So if a thought does form, try to notice where it is in your awareness and just breathe right through it. An image I like to use is of a spider on its web. It stays in one corner of the web, and as soon as there’s the slightest vibration anywhere in the web, it goes right there, deals with whatever the insect is, and then comes right back. In this case, you have your center, wherever you’ve chosen to focus your awareness. Then you begin to realize that there’s a thought forming, and as I said, thoughts forming often have a physical sensation to go along with them. So breathe through that physical sensation. Try to get quicker and quicker at sensing its presence. And you begin to see the stages in which the mind creates states of becoming inside, where a little world will appear. And an identity will appear in that world, surrounding something you might want, something you find interesting, something you find curious, something you find desirable. And then you go into that thought world. You’ve lost the present moment, or you’ve lost reference to the present moment. Of course, it is happening here in the present moment, but your parameters are someplace else. And the more quickly you can sense when one of those thoughts is forming and then breathe right through it, the more you can see the steps of how a thought forms, how it becomes a world, how you go into that world. So you begin to realize that keeping the mind still is not just leaving it there, like putting down a load and just leaving the load there on the spot where you put it. Because there will be a tendency for the mind to want to think about other things. And it’s in learning how not to think about other things that you actually learn some important things about the processes that rule your life. You become more and more skilled at looking at the thought, not in terms of its content, not in terms of whether you like it, but simply how does the thought form? Why does it have an influence on me? How can I free myself from that influence? You’re looking at it as a process. It comes from something, it goes someplace else, just like the Buddha when he got on the right track. He looked at his thoughts not in terms of whether he liked them or not, but where they were coming from, where they were going. So it comes full circle. His original insight was what finally led him to get the mind in concentration. And when the mind is in concentration, he came back and learned how to understand this process. But more could be learned by looking at your thinking as simply processes happening, and there’s a pattern to how they happen. Then you can develop some dispassion for them. It’s the dispassion that sets you free. You realize that the mind has been lying to itself, playing games of make-believe. And sometimes they’re fun, and sometimes they give you a chance to get out of hand. So this process of thought formation, which we take for granted, is precisely where we’re going to see the important things. So you want to get the mind quiet right here, right here, right now. Learn how not to take the present moment for granted. There’s a time when the Buddha was talking to the monks about practicing mindfulness of death. And one of the monks said, “Yes, I do that already.” And the Buddha asked him, “How many times a day do you do it?” And the monk said, “Once a day.” Another monk said, “Well, I do it twice a day.” Another monk said, “Three times a day.” He finally got to two monks. One of them said, “As I’m eating my food, I tell myself, ‘The amount of time it takes to chew up this piece of food, I can do some important things with my mind to focus on the mind.’” Another monk said, “As I breathe in, I tell myself, ‘With this breath, I can do something important with my mind, so that’s where I focus.’” And the Buddha said, “Those last two monks are the only ones that are really heedful.” Everybody else, he said, was heedless. So heedfulness means seeing the importance of the present moment, not as a wonderful place to be or a pleasant place to be, but as a working place. As a place where work can be done, important work can be done, as you understand your mind and understand how, if you don’t really know what’s going on in the mind, you can suffer. But if you understand these processes, they can’t make you suffer. So learn not to take the present moment for granted. Each moment, as you’re working, as you’re in the kitchen, as you’re talking with other people, keep watch on your mind. There’s a lot of really fascinating things to learn. As the Buddha said, if you have this ability to really understand what’s going on in the present moment, that’s what leads you beyond the present moment. You’ll begin to take the present moment apart. You’ll see how you’ve been constructing it. And you’ll allow it to dismantle in the present moment. That’s when things don’t really open up inside. There are stories in the canon of monks who gained awakening while they were on their alms round. There was a nun who gained awakening when she turned out the lamp in her room one time. So even in moments when you’re not in formal meditation, keep watch. Because insights into what the mind is doing, how it’s imposing unnecessary suffering on itself, they can come at any time. And if you’re present at the right time, then you can see. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/221105_Don't_Take_This_Breath_for_Granted.mp3>