Friends with the Breath

November 15, 2022

Start with some long, deep in-and-out breaths to emphasize the feeling of breathing in the body. When we focus on the breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy in the body. It counts as one of the properties of the body itself. The air comes in from outside, but the breath originates inside the body. And because it’s so essential to your life, it’s good to be on good terms with it. You want to become friends with your breath. So, wherever the breathing is most obvious, focus your attention there. But as I said last night, when you think of focus, think of a soft focus, one that doesn’t put too much pressure on the breath. Then notice how it feels. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you’re free to change. Try shorter breathing, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to get a sense of what the body needs in terms of the breathing right now. When we think of the breath as energy flowing through the body, it’s a whole body process, all the way down to your fingers, all the way down to your toes. So try to have that expansive sense of the body at the same time that you maintain your focus. This is one of the skills of how to pay attention to your breath. It’s like looking at a painting. You can focus on a detail in the painting, but you can also see how it relates to everything else in the painting. If thoughts wander off, just drop them. And you’ll find yourself back at the breath. You don’t have to pull yourself back. This is home base. If thoughts wander off again, just drop them. Again. And as you return to the breath, try to breathe in a way that feels especially good. Think of whatever parts of the body. Don’t get involved in the breath usually, or don’t seem to be involved in the breathing usually. Give them a little extra energy. And as the breath starts getting comfortable, you can explore how it feels in different parts of the body. One of the dangers of sitting or breathing comfortably is that the mind drops the breath and goes for the comfort, in which case you lose the foundation for your meditation. Things begin to blur out. And so in the Buddha’s breath instructions, the next step is to breathe in and out, aware of the whole body all at once. You can either do that, just all at once, or you can go through the body section by section first. Just start as down around the navel. Locate that part of the body in your awareness. Watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out. See what kind of breathing feels good there. If there’s any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. So no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you don’t hold onto any tension as you breathe out. You don’t have to pull it from anywhere else. After you’ve been with that spot long enough, then you can move up the body: the solar plexus, middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head. When you focus on the head, try to be especially gentle. This is the part of the body that tends to get overworked. Think of the breath coming into the head from all directions, the energy flowing in all directions. Then go down the back of the neck, down the shoulders and the arms. Return to the back of the neck and go down the spine. Then out the legs, out to the tips of the toes. Then if you want, you can start at the navel and go through the body again as many times as you like until you’re ready to settle down. Then you can choose any part of the body that you’d like to stay focused. Allow your attention to settle there. Think about the object of the mind not being a focal point but being a support. So allow the breath in any spot in the body to be a support for your mind, a place where you can settle in. And then think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. So you’re aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And allow the breath to find its own rhythm. At that point, your main duty is simply to maintain a sense of centered but broad awareness. And see if you can keep it there. And there’ll be parts of the mind that say, well, what’s next? And you remind yourself, this is what’s next. And develop this. A state of concentration, a state of stillness. And as the Buddha said, as you do this, you’re developing both tranquility and insight. And at this point, the insight is how to keep your mind with the topic, on the breath, not to fall for its arguments, that he wants to think about something else or is impatient to get to the next step. Just keep reminding it right here, right here. This is a skill. And you learn a lot about the intentions that come up in the mind by trying to hold on to this one intention that you’re going to stay here. Other intentions will come. In normal life, an intention moves in, pushes another one out of the way. And another one comes in, pushes that out of the way. And we’re like a boat on a river with no anchor. Whichever way the currents flow, that’s the way we tend to go. And if you were to draw a map of where the mind goes in the course of not just a day, 30 minutes, it’d be all over the place. And we’re not very much aware of the different forces moving in, what they call the currents of the mind in the forest tradition. But you sense the currents once you’ve got an anchor. You can see where they’re coming from, you see where they could push you, but you’re not going to go there. So the insight at this stage is insight in how to maintain this. One of the things that’s going to pull you away will be feelings of pain in different parts of the body. And this is another way you gain insight, learning how to stay with the breath in spite of the pains. And actually use the breath to make the pains a lot less burdensome to the mind. If there’s a pain in one part of the body, don’t focus there to begin with. Focus on another part of the body that is comfortable. Breathing feels good coming in, feels good going out. Flows smoothly. Stay there. And John Lee’s images of going into a house where you know that some of the floorboards are rotten. If you’re going to sit down or lie down on the floor, you don’t lie on the rotten boards. You lie down on the good ones. So stay with the breathing that feels comfortable. And then after a while, when you feel ready, think of the comfortable breathing flowing through the pain. For instance, if you have a pain on the right side, focus first on the left. And then think of the good breath energy on the left side flowing over to the right side. Or if you have a pain in the knee, think of the good energy in the chest flowing down the torso, out the leg, and through the pain, out the toes. In other words, you maintain your main focus on the comfortable part. Let its good influence spread as much as it can. In some cases, you find the pain goes away. In other cases, it doesn’t go away, but you’re able to relax a lot of the tension. And when you feel up to it, you can focus on the pain directly. And start asking questions about your perceptions around it. The Buddha talks about how we fabricate our present experience out of a combination of past karma and present intentions. And among those present intentions are your perceptions, the images you hold in mind. And you’ll find that these have a huge impact on how you relate to pain. So ask yourself, do you see the pain as a solid block? Has it become the same thing as the part of the body that’s in pain? In other words, if there’s a pain in the knee, is the knee pain now? And you have to remember that before the pain was there, there were knee sensations. They were not the same thing as the pain. And those sensations can be analyzed into the four elements. There’s solidity, earth. Liquidity, water. Which in the forest tradition, they tend to equate with coolness. There’s the breath energy, and then there’s fire, warmth. The pain is none of those things. Now we tend to glom it onto some of those things when the pain feels hot or pain feels solid. But actually the quality of the pain itself is something different. It may be in the same place as the knee, but it’s not the same thing as the knee. Or maybe it’s not really in that place. Sometimes you have pain that you feel is in one place in the body, but when you actually focus on that part of the body and look at it carefully, the pain is not there. It’s someplace else. That can happen. To see if you can see the body and the pain as two separate things. Then of course your awareness and the pain are two separate things as well. Pain has no awareness. This, the Buddha said, is the beginning of wisdom, learning how to see things as separate. We hear so much about wisdom of oneness and the wisdom of interconnectedness. But the Buddha himself said that insight comes from seeing things as separate. Pain is one thing, the body is something else. Or that perception that the pain is a solid block. Look at it carefully. Does it have a shape? You may be imposing a shape on it, but if you question that shape, you begin to realize it becomes more amorphous. And it’s not solid or continuous. It comes and goes, comes and goes. You can try to chase down which is the spot of the pain that’s sharpest. And as you chase it down, you begin to realize it moves around. And when you’re chasing it, you’re no longer the victim. All too often we feel that the pain is shooting us, that the pain is aimed at us, and we’re just sitting there, the victim of the pain. But when you get more proactive with the pain, then you begin to realize it can’t shoot you. You’ve got it on the run. Another perception is to realize that as soon as pain comes into your awareness, it’s going away. It’s like sitting on the caboose of a train, or sitting in a chair in a train, when your back is to the front of the train. And you look out the window, and as soon as anything comes into the range of your visual awareness, it’s going away already. So in the same way, as soon as the pain moments start, they’re going away, going away. You’re not the target. And as you focus on the pain, analyze the way you hold your perceptions around the pain. Two things can happen. One is the pain will actually go away. The other is the pain doesn’t go away, but you can be with the pain, and the mind doesn’t suffer. If you’re analyzing the pain, and it’s just getting too much, you’re not getting anywhere with it, go back to the comfortable parts of the body. Those are your safe places. And the pain can have the other part of the body. It’s a good lesson, and not self, for the time being. The knee can just be there. The pain can have the knee. But you don’t have to get in there with it. So the breath is your foundation. The ability to stay with the breath is going to be the basic skill you’re going to need. So learn to settle in. Feel at home here, being on good terms with the breath. Be friends with the breath. As with any friendship, it takes time. You can’t walk up to somebody and say hi and immediately be fast friends. You ask questions. You observe. Ask questions again. Observe again. As the Buddha said, if you want to know somebody, you have to be with them for a long time, and you have to be very observant. So be with the breath for a long time, and be very observant about what the breath does, and what it can do. Here again, you begin to see that your perceptions around the breath play a huge role. When you breathe in, which direction does the breath flow in the body? Can it flow in the opposite direction? What would happen if it did? And you notice that our perceptions impose an awful lot on the breathing process. And it’s a big lesson in the power of our present actions. But all too often we hear the teaching that what you experience right now is the result of your past karma. But that was a view that the Buddha actually attacked. In fact, he saw it as so wrong that even though he wasn’t the sort of person who would go around and pick fights with people, he would go around and ask people, do you really teach this, that everything you experience right now is the result of past actions? And if they said yes, he said, well, that means that you kill right now because of past actions. You steal right now. You can do all kinds of horrible things, and it’s all because of past actions. You can’t stop. If you teach that, then the people who believe you are left unprotected, bewildered. Unprotected in the sense that they have no way of believing that they can do anything to change what’s going on in the present. And that’s why we talk a lot about some influences coming in from the past and about others come from what you’re shaping right now with your perceptions, and the way you talk to yourself, and the way you breathe. These are all things that we can try to exert some control over and do it skillfully. So even though we may have some past bad karma, we don’t have to suffer from it. The Buddha’s image is of a crystal of salt. If you put in a little cup of water, the water is going to be too salty to drink. But if you put it into a clean river, you can still drink the water in the river because there’s just so much more water. In the same way, he said, the mind that is well-trained is like that river of water, broad and expansive. It refers to the Brahma Viharas, but also says training in virtue, training in discernment. Training so that your mind is not overcome, not overcome by pleasure, not overcome by pain. These are all things we can do right now so that the salt of our past bad actions gets dissolved away. And the goodness of our current actions is like that broad river. So pay attention to what you’re doing right now as you stay with the breath. The perceptions that come up in your mind, the images that you hold of the breath, the images that you hold of any pains that may be distracting you. And learn the extent to which you can make changes right here, right now, in the way you relate to this breath that you’re trying to become friends with. The breath does its thing. The problems in the friendship are all on our side. But as we become more sensitive to what we’re bringing to the friendship, we can actually make it a friendship that we can rely on because we ourselves become more reliable.

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