Breath Meditation Checklist

May 30, 2023

The Buddha’s basic breath meditation instructions come in sixteen steps, but it’s not the case that you follow them one through sixteen in numerical order. They’re divided into four sets, four each, called tetrads. The first tetrad focuses on the body, the second focuses on feelings, the third focuses on the mind, and the fourth focuses on mental qualities or dhammas. As you’ll notice, when you’re sitting here to meditate, it’s not the case that first you have the breath, and then out of nowhere come feelings, and then someplace else comes the mind. They’re all here. Those first three tetrads are developed as a set. In other words, you’ve got the breath, which is the body, and you’ve got the feeling of ease or dis-ease that goes along with the breath. Then you’ve got the quality of the mind that you’re bringing to watch the breath. You’re going to put those all together. And as the Buddha himself points out, you’re focused on the breath, and then feelings are right there, the mind is right there, mental qualities are right there. But focus on the first three tetrads first, because they’re a good checklist. You’re settling down. And things aren’t settling down right. Either you simply can’t get the mind to be still, or when it’s still there’s some imbalance. There’s a pain in the body that seems to go along with the meditation. Or there’s something wrong with the breath. Or there’s something wrong with the mind. The mind may be antsy. It’s got some issues. Or it just doesn’t have much energy. So you can figure out what the problem is, and then you can correct the problem. If it’s the breath, think about how the breath runs through the body. This will automatically involve feelings. And what goes along with feelings are perceptions. The two of them work together as mental fabrications, and they’re an important part of that second tetrad. So if the breath doesn’t seem to be running smoothly in the body, how can you change your perception and your mental image of the breath to make things better? You can think of the breath bathing the body. So you’re not here watching the breath in one side of the body while you’re in another side of the body. Think of yourself as being totally surrounded by the breath. There are times when there are headaches, which may be because as you’re breathing in there’s a sense of the energy flowing up. Or think of the energy flowing down. A long time ago, there was a Zen master who suffered from what he called “Zen sickness.” He’d sit down and meditate, and there’d be these splitting headaches. His solution was to think of a big ball of butter on top of his head that was gradually melting, melting, melting. So as he breathed in, the butter was melting down. As he breathed out, the butter was melting down. An alternative perception you could have would be to focus on your hands and your feet. That’s one way of dealing with an imbalance, just changing the image you hold in mind. That can change the feelings, that can change the breath. Other times you’re more consciously aware of the fact that now I have to take some good long, deep in-and-out breaths, especially if you’re beginning to drift off. Because the breath, when it’s very subtle, can be hard to follow, especially if you’re energy level is low. Think of breathing in ways that are more energizing for the body. Try long in, short out, heavier breathing. See what works. Then there’s the issue of the mind itself. Sometimes it’s not all that glad to be here meditating. So you’re trying to think about what would gladden you when the breath is in. The Buddha lists qualities that bring the mind to concentration. Gladness always comes before the mind settles down. And sometimes before gladness there’s conviction. You’ll learn how to talk yourself into realizing how important it is that you have this opportunity, how fortunate you are to have this opportunity, to be sitting here breathing, focused on the breath and not have any other responsibilities or concerns right now. Focusing on the breath seems to be a waste of time. You can remind yourself. You’re creating a good present moment for yourself. And it’s not just a nice place to be in the present moment, but you’re also developing qualities that’ll see you through into the future. Qualities like mindfulness, concentration, discernment. Whatever happens in the future, you’re going to need these qualities. There’s even a contemplation that the Buddha calls “recollection of the devas.” It’s not so much recollecting the fact that there are devas, although that’s an important part of it, but realizing that as you’re practicing, you’re developing the qualities that would make you into a deva next time around. I’ve mentioned before that Ajahn Swat once mentioned to a group of his students from Bangkok when they were visiting here that it wouldn’t be a good idea to set your heart on coming back to the human realm next time around because the human realm is going to get pretty bad. He said, “See if you can practice as a deva.” So what does that involve? Well, it starts with conviction that your actions really do make a difference and you act in skillful ways. And then there’s virtue. You look at your behavior and you don’t see that you’re harming anybody in any way at all because you are following the precepts. There’s relinquishment, which ties in closely with generosity. You make a habit of being generous with your belongings, generous with your time, generous with your energy, generous with your knowledge, generous with your forgiveness. And there’s learning. The Pali term is bhuh-sacca. It means you have many truths that you’ve learned, that you’ve memorized. We’re not much into memorization, but it’s good to memorize some of the passages of the Dhamma. You think about when you’re dying, the things that will be going through your head. One of our monks here was talking about how when he was an exchange student in Mexico, learning the language with a group of Americans, and the message was that a Mexican host had a party for them one night and they sang Mexican folk songs. Then they turned to the Americans and said, “Well, can you sing us some American folk songs?” And the gringos looked at one another and they couldn’t think of any folk songs. All they could think of was commercial jingles, Gilligan’s Island, things from TV like that. So imagine having that kind of stuff sloshing around in your head. And as you approach death, the things that slosh around like that will begin to take over. A lot of things you’ll forget. Your short-term memory will go, but then your long-term memory will be pretty active. So you want to memorize good things that will remind you. That’s important where you focus your mind. It’s important the views that you hold in mind. As the Buddha said, you can do a lot of unskillful things in this lifetime, but if you develop the right view and stop doing unskillful things, and maintain the right view all the way through death, that can counteract the karma of unskillful things. So keep that principle in mind. Finally, there’s the quality of discernment, what the Buddha calls penetrative knowledge of arising and passing away. This doesn’t mean simply noting, “Oh yes, things arise and pass away.” Anybody can note that. That’s not the kind of knowledge that’s going to get you very far if you just leave it right there. But if you want to notice, “Well, certain things arise and they have a good impact on the mind. Certain things arise and they have a bad impact on the mind.” How are you going to encourage the ones that have a good impact and discourage the ones that have a bad impact? That’s a skill. And that kind of knowledge is what’s called penetrative. And where are you going to get that knowledge? Through the meditation, what you’re doing right now. So you’re thinking in these ways, and it gladdens you. You’re here in a good place where you’re encouraged in these virtues of conviction, virtue, generosity, learning, discernment. And you have an opportunity to focus directly on the skills of the mind that will enable you to maintain discernment and maintain your learning so you can put them to use when you really need them. Because, as the Buddha said, you want to be heedful of the fact that you may be young, healthy, alive, but there will come a time as you get old, get sick, you’re about to die, and it’s good to have an attainment in the mind, good qualities in the mind that will hold you in good stead when aging, illness, and death really move in. That’s what we’re working on right now. So these thoughts can gladden the mind, make you more eager to focus in on the breath and do the exercises that help the mind to settle down, that strengthen your mindfulness, strengthen your concentration, strengthen your discernment. Gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind. And then when you see things that burn, you’re able to release the mind. When you’re focusing on the body and feelings and the mind in this way, then the fact that you’re focused on the breath can take you far. Think about it. If we hadn’t heard about the Buddha or heard about this practice of breath meditation, who would have thought this up on his or her own? We’re fortunate that we have. We have this opportunity to take this thing that’s happening all the time—breath is coming in, breath is going out—and make a lot out of it. So that when the breath does stop, our mind will be well-equipped with the skills it needs. So it’s not blown away by the fact that it’s leaving the body. This is why breath meditation is good now, and it gives a good impact on the future. This is a good place to be. This is a good thing to be doing.

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