Study the Present

September 14, 2023

Try to settle in comfortably with the breath. This can mean either being careful about how you focus on it or taking an interest in how you breathe. If your focus is too strong, especially at the beginning, you start pushing the energies in the body around and it gets uncomfortable. You’re forcing things too much. So settle in. Try to figure out a sense of just right. The image in the canon is of someone holding a baby quail in his hand. If he squeezes it too tight, the baby quail dies. If he’s too loose, the little quail will fly away. So get a sense of just right. How much pressure is enough to stay here but not to interfere with the flow of energy in the body? Then look at the breath itself. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? One of the best ways of getting the mind into concentration is not to think so much about getting the mind still and forcing it down, but taking an interest in what you’ve got right here. The breath is the breath. We often think of it as the air coming in and out through the nose. But there’s also the aspect of the movement of the body that allows the air to come in and out. And that’s something that’s more interesting, because the air coming out of the nose is rather neutral. But the way the energy flows in the body can be constricted or can be very, very comfortable. What would feel best for the body right now? Which parts of the body seem to be starved of energy that would respond well if you allowed the breath to go there? What kind of breathing would feel good? Long? Short? In long? Out short? In short? Out long? Heavy? Light? Fast? Slow? Deep? Shallow? And John Lee recommends starting out with some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths as a way of energizing the body. And then allowing the breath to calm down as feels right. But here’s where you get to judge things for yourself. What kind of breathing would you like right now? Taking an interest in the breath. Here it is, the energy flow in the body. As we’ve learned from traditional medicine in different countries, if the energy flow is good, it’s going to be good for the organs in the body. It’s going to be healthy. So here you have it, free medicine. Simply, you don’t know which kind of medicine you need right now because you haven’t studied enough. So take the opportunity to study the breath, study the present moment. And the best way to study, of course, is to experiment. Try long breathing for a while. See how that feels. Then shorter breathing. See how that feels. And then compare them. Which feels better? If you’re not sure, try it again. The Buddha describes his path as one of a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. He says it’s like the continental shelf off of India. It gradually moves away from the shore. And then it’s just a sharp drop-off. The gradual movement is the development of skill as you get gradually more and more sensitive to what’s going on here. That’s something that has to develop with practice. The sudden drop-off is when you gain sudden insights that take you to a new level. But you’re not going to get the sudden insights without doing the gradual work. Try deep breathing, shallow breathing. Which feels better? If you’re not sure, try it again. How deep? How shallow? Try that. Heavy? Light? Try that. Try different combinations. Deep and heavy? Deep and light? This is through comparing that you learn to see things. I have a student who teaches computer software engineering. He had a student one time turn in what he said was “ugly code.” So he called the student into his office and showed him how someone else might solve the same problem in a much more elegant way. In a streamlined way. And by comparing his own work with the more streamlined version, the student saw things that he hadn’t seen before, realized things that he hadn’t seen before, in terms of what was possible. So here’s your opportunity to explore what is possible right now. Breathing in and out with a sense of refreshment, even rapture. Tingling through the body, your hair standing on end. It can get that good. There is that potential there. You look at the breath right now and it does seem to have that much potential, but you don’t know the potentials of things unless you play with them, experiment with them. So experiment. Study them. Find the present moment and as to whether you’re going to settle down quickly or settle down slowly or how deeply you’re going to settle down. Don’t make that an issue. Think about any activity that you enjoy getting involved in. The mind naturally concentrates because you enjoy the activity. You find it interesting, rewarding. You’ll learn to see what kind of rewards the breath can give you. And part of that involves expanding your ideas about what the breath can do. If you’re thinking about breath as energy, you realize it’s not limited just to the torso, not limited just to the lungs. There’s an energy flow throughout the body. As the blood courses through the blood vessels, there’s an energy flow. As messages get passed along the nerves, there’s an energy flow. As your muscles tighten and relax, there’s an energy flow. Here’s a way you can breathe in where all the different energies seem to be working in concert, sometimes simply just thinking that. Everybody works together and the energies sort themselves out. Other times you have to focus on blockages and specific parts of the body. A blockage, say, in the spine, a blockage in your neck, a blockage in your wrists. To find a place where it seems blocked, can you consciously relax it and see if you can maintain that relaxed state? Because all too often you can relax on the out-breath but you tense up again on the in-breath. Can you relax the tight spots and then keep them relaxed as you breathe in? Sometimes you’ll find that certain muscles of the body have been doing most of the breathing work, but if you relax them, they can’t do the breathing work. But other muscles will pitch in. There are lots of little things to explore here. Keep in mind that this will be good for the health of the body and it will provide a good home for the mind to stay here in the present moment. You can keep yourself interested. And with interest comes concentration, focus, a focus that allows you to be centered on one spot but to have a sense of the whole body as well. It’s like looking at a painting. You may focus, say, if it’s a portrait, you may focus on the eyes. But that doesn’t mean that the eyes are the only thing you see. You see the whole painting. It’s just that one spot seems to be more compelling, more interesting than others. Or in the case of the body, some spots seem to be more rewarding. As I said, some are very sensitive to the flow of the energy. And if you give them the energy they want, it feels really, really good, really gratifying. Other spots in the body are more like crossroads. Different energy channels in the body will intersect at some spots. And if you keep one spot open, it opens up lots of different channels all at once. So study the present moment and study it in the sense of seeing what its potentials are by experimenting. You’ll learn things about your sense of the body, your sense of the mind, your sense of the mind. You’ll learn things about how you relate to your body. You’ll learn things about how your mental images or perceptions will have an influence on how you experience the body. You’ll find that the mind will get concentrated naturally and that you’re having to force it. Aside from trying to keep remembering to stay here, don’t wander off to other things. If you’re going to see cause and effect, you have to be able to watch. Sometimes the effects come immediately, other times they take time. So try to be as continuous as you can in your focus on the breath, your focus on the present moment. Not simply for the sake of just being here, but for the sake of seeing what’s going on, exploring potentials. This is concentration through interest. And it’ll keep on giving rewards.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230914_Study_the_Present.mp3>