Gather Around the Breath

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We’re practicing mindfulness of breathing. Because it’s a mindfulness practice, some people think it means just following the breath wherever it’s going to go, or following the mind wherever it’s going to go. Being non-reactive, non-judgmental. But mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind that you want to stay with the breath, as the Buddha says. You’re practicing this practice to get the mind into a state of concentration. Here again, there’s some conflict or some disagreement as to what the word “samadhi,” that I translate as “concentration,” or most people translate as “concentration,” actually means. Some people say “concentration” sounds too tense. It’d be better to think of it as lucid calm. But calm is one of the factors for awakening that’s separate from concentration. It’s one of the precursors for concentration. The way “concentration” is defined in the text, it definitely is staying with one thing. “Citta-segagata” is the Pali term, which basically means having one gathering place for the mind. You’re going to stay with the breath. And there will be other things coming up that are related to the breath. Of course, when you breathe, there are going to be feelings of pleasure or pain in the body that are related to the breath. The fact that they’re related to the breath means that they’re not outside of the realm of your concentration. And of course, that’s the state of your mind, trying to stay with the breath. You’re going to be aware of that too. So you stay focused around the breath. Everything gathers right here. Some people object to the idea of working on having one focus for the mind, because it requires desire. But the Buddha is very clear that desire is part of the path. It’s part of right effort. You’re trying to generate desire to give rise to skillful qualities. And this is one of them. Get the mind still focused on the breath. The breath is your anchor in the present moment. So we can see the mind in the present moment. As long as you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present. Then you can get to see how the mind is shaping things in the present moment. And you can observe it directly in action. So you’re not thinking about the mind in the past or the mind in the future. You’ve got the mind right here, ideally. Now, sometimes the mind is not right here, or it comes and goes, in which case you have to work with it. And here the Buddha says there are three things that you do with the mind as you’re mindful of the breathing. One is you try to gladden it. The second is you try to concentrate it. And the third is you release it. Gladdening means basically happy to be here. There’s a quality you want to develop proactively to reduce the likelihood that you will get distracted or you will wander away. If you’re glad to be here, you resist the pull to go away. There are lots of reasons to be glad to be here right now. You have an opportunity to get to know your own mind. You get to know the potentials for the breath and the mind in the present moment. You’re practicing the teachings of a Noble One. Sometimes it’s good to think about the Buddha as you set down to meditate. And Chan Suet used to talk about how it was important to develop an attitude of confidence. And conviction in what you’re doing right now. And part of that has to do with who founded this path. Someone who sacrificed everything to find the ultimate happiness. And then when he found it, he didn’t try to sell it. He offered his instructions for free. In fact, he would wander around, find people who were ready for his instructions all over northern India on foot for 45 years. It would be hard to find somebody like that now. So it’s good to think that you have the opportunity to practice the teachings of someone who had that much integrity and that much commitment. Whatever about the Buddha inspires you, it’s good to think about that as you settle down to practice. Then, of course, there’s the breath itself. You make the breath very comfortable and it feels good to breathe. You can think about how the breath energy in the body has an impact on your health. If you have any chronic illness or chronic pain, you can explore how the breath energy can be of help. Because it is the energy in the body we’re talking about when the Buddha classifies the in-and-out breath. He doesn’t classify it as a tactile sensation, say, at the nose. It’s part of the wind property in the body itself, the energy property. And that energy property is something you can sense wherever the nerves go, wherever your blood vessels go. In fact, that relates to the type of concentration the Buddha’s trying to get you to develop. That’s the second thing, to concentrate the mind. When it’s concentrated, we tend to think of it being centered at one point. But the Buddhist descriptions, or the analogies he gives for the state of mind you’re trying to develop, make the point that we’re trying to get the mind into a full body awareness. The breath fills the body. The sense of ease that goes along with the breath fills the body as well. The image the Buddha gives is like a lake that has a cool spring, and the cool waters of the spring fill the lake. Or lotuses that are growing immersed in the water, and they’re saturated from their roots to the tips of the flowers in water. Or a person sitting with a white cloth covering his whole body. You’re trying to develop a pure, bright awareness that fills your whole body. That’s the quality you’re trying to develop here. It’s a lot more solid than one-pointed awareness. One-pointed awareness can be very intense sometimes, and there will be times when you do want to emphasize the one-pointedness of your focus. But the problem with one-pointedness is that if anything comes up to disturb it, you’ve lost your concentration. Whereas with full body awareness, things can come in and go out, but they don’t disturb the frame of your awareness, which is the body as a whole. So try to develop that sense of the whole body all at once. The whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and you’re aware of the whole body all at once. Awareness of your feet is in your feet, your awareness of your hands is in your hands, awareness of the eyes is in the eyes, all at once. That’s the state you’re trying to maintain. That’s releasing. There are many levels of release. Maybe we can talk about the releasing on the most basic level, which is getting the mind away from its distractions. Even though you’re trying to develop this sense of being gathered together around one thing, there will be other vagrant notions coming through the mind. It’s part of your past karma. The question is, are you going to go with them or not? If you release solidly with the breath, you realize you don’t have to go. But before you get solidly there, there are going to be a lot of temptations to follow other things around. So it’s good to know how to deal with them. The Buddha sets out five strategies altogether. The first one is when you realize that you’ve left the breath, just bring yourself right back. Otherwise, there’s been a slip in mindfulness, a slip in your alertness. But now you’ve regained mindfulness, you’ve regained alertness, so bring the mind right back. Sometimes you have to ask yourself, what was it about the breath that allowed you to go to begin with? You might want to change the way you breathe. So it’s more gratifying, more satisfying. Or here again, there are times when you’re wandering off, and before you can get back to the breath, you have to think about something to remind yourself of why you want to go back to the breath. Again, you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. If you’re having doubts about your ability to do this practice, remind yourself of the good things you’ve done in the past, the times you’ve been generous, the times you’ve been principled in your actions, when it was a challenge. Or you can think about death. That’s one of the topics of meditation that the Buddha recommends. And it’s not just thinking death, death, death. It’s thinking, there’s work that has to be done. My mind needs to be brought into good shape before I die. And I don’t know when I’m going to die, but I do know I have the opportunity to work on the mind right now. So this is basically a lesson in heedfulness. There’s important work that has to be done, and if you don’t do it now, when are you going to do it? It doesn’t get easier as you get older. So that’s the first strategy. Just simply remind yourself that you’re not here to wander around. You’re here to do work. You’re here to make a difference in the mind by getting it skilled and staying with one thing. The second strategy is, if the mind keeps going back to a particular topic, remind yourself of the drawbacks of that. If you were to think that topic for a whole day, what would accomplish? Either it would be a total waste of time, or it would actually get you to do something unskillful. So I give it any time at all. The image the Buddha gives us is, think of your mind as a young man or a young woman. Find him adormant. Find the beauty looking in a mirror. And suddenly discovering that there’s a dead snake or a dead dog hanging from his neck. You don’t want to get rid of it immediately. So try to develop a sense of real distaste for that kind of thinking. Then get back to the breath. The third technique is to ignore the distraction. If it keeps coming back, again and again, no matter how much you think of its drawbacks, just tell yourself, “I don’t have to pay attention to it.” Here the Buddha’s image is of a man who sees something he doesn’t want to see, so he turns his eyes away. You can think of yourself as being in a large room like this. You’re sitting in one corner. You’ve got work to do. There are people chattering away in another corner. If you pay attention to what they’re saying, your work is not going to happen. It’s not going to get done. Or you can think of those thoughts as being like stray dogs coming around asking for food. You know if you feed them, they’re going to hang around. So you just don’t feed them. And they’ll whine and they’ll whimper. But if you’re firm and not giving them anything to eat, they’re going to go away. The same with thoughts in the mind. If you don’t pay them any attention, they’re going to hang around for a while, but then they’ll go. And you’ve learned an important lesson. Things that come up in the mind feed on the attention you give to them. So why pay them any attention? The fourth strategy is to notice that when a thought comes into the mind, there’s going to be a pattern of tension in the body. You’ll sense this, especially if you’ve been getting sensitive to the breath energies in different parts of the body. If you find the tension, just release it, relax it. It’s as if there’s a marker in your body around which the thought will coalesce. And you remove the marker. There’s nothing to depend on, nothing to stand on. The image the Buddha gives here is a man who’s walking. He says, “Why am I walking? Why don’t I just stand?” As he’s standing, he says, “Why am I standing? Why don’t I sit down?” While he’s sitting down, “Why am I sitting here? Why don’t I lie down?” In other words, you get into more and more relaxed positions that take less energy. We talked about the energy that’s required for the concentration. Distraction requires energy too. As long as you’re going to be putting energy into your thinking, put energy into things that are going to be useful, like getting the mind to settle down. The final strategy is to have nothing else work. Just press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, cleanse your teeth, and tell yourself, “I will not think that thought.” Just squeeze it out. The Buddha’s image here is a strong man. It’s overpowered, a weak man. It bends him down. You might use a meditation word. Bhutto is a popular word in the forest tradition. Just repeat it really fast, like a machine gun. Bhutto, bhutto, bhutto. You’ll be very firm in your determination. You’re not going with a thought. Of the various strategies, this is the one that requires the least insight and just the most force. And you won’t be able to keep it up for long. But it can clear the air. Then you can go back to one of the other techniques. You’re going to need a complete toolbox here. This is a sledgehammer. There’s not just one way you can deal with distractions. There are five main ways. And then there are specific ways of dealing with specific distractions, like sleepiness, or lust, lustful thoughts. But everything falls under these five main categories. As the Buddha said, we’re not going to do that. When you’ve mastered these, then you can think whatever thought you want to think, and you don’t have to think any thoughts you don’t want to think. And what he doesn’t say, but what is actually true, is that you get more and more skilled in deciding what’s worth thinking. Your standards for what’s worth thinking grow higher. And you’re more inclined to want to let the mind rest when it can. So it’s not thinking unnecessary thoughts, not wasting its time, not wasting its energy. That’s the way you can maintain that state of the mind being gathered around one thing. You release it from its distractions. You get it concentrated in the sense of being solidly filling the whole body. And you’re glad to be here. When you’ve worked with the mind in these three ways, then your mindfulness of breathing gets really good. You’re really strong. And you do get into good, strong states of concentration that are very clear. Because the whole purpose of concentration is to get to see your mind more clearly. And when it’s still and fully aware like this, that’s when your sensitivity to what’s going on in the mind will grow. So let’s place this “be” to see what’s happening as it’s happening. And be able to do something about it.

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