Breathing Skillfully

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A point that Ajahn Fung repeated again and again was that the Buddha taught a skill. He wasn’t teaching us about reality out there. He was teaching us how to breathe, how to think, how to talk to ourselves in a way that doesn’t cause suffering. As the Buddha said, we suffer because we do very simple things in ignorance. So he wasn’t satisfied with just talking about how people are ignorant. He wanted to train them so they could overcome their ignorance. And one of the things he said that we do in ignorance is the way we breathe, simply like that. There are so many other things we think are more important that we let the breath go on automatic pilot. But there are still parts of the mind that are keeping track of when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out, when it should stop coming in, when it should start going out. And that happens in the dark. So as we meditate, we’re trying to bring some light to that. So, focus on your breath. When we talk about a skill, it’s important that you actually do the skill, practice it. Otherwise it’s like talking about swimming without actually swimming. You don’t get the exercise, you don’t get the enjoyment. On a hot day you talk about swimming, it doesn’t cool you down. So get in the water, close your eyes and focus on your breath. Take some good, long, deep in and out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Because when we talk about breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the feeling of energy that flows in the body, that allows the air to come in, allows the air to go out. Where do you feel that? Focus your attention there. And then ask yourself if you like it, the way you’re breathing. You can breathe in lots of different ways. You can do long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, or in long, out short, in short, out long, heavy, light. The breath is yours to play with. Find a way of breathing that feels good, that you like to be with. The Buddha says this is like being a cook. You’re working for a king. And the king doesn’t always tell you what he likes or what he doesn’t like. You have to observe. You make lots of different foods for him, put them on the table, and then notice what he reaches for the second time, the third time. That’s a sign that he liked it. Once, but he doesn’t reach for it again. That’s a sign he doesn’t particularly care for it. So you make less of that kind of food and more of the earlier kinds of food. That way you get a reward. In other words, find something that the mind likes right now. Does it like long breathing? Does it like short? Does it want the body to be energized? Does it want the body to be calmed down? Notice what the body tells you. Notice what the mind tells you. Because we’re doing this to get to know the body, and more importantly, to get to know the mind. So that we can use it well. So that when it shapes its present moment experience, it does it well. Because we do shape our experience, what comes to us through sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. That’s the result of old karma. What we do with these things is new karma. You can’t change your old karma. Again, it’s like being a cook. You open the refrigerator today and there may not be all that much in the fridge. But if you’re a good cook, you can figure out how to make good food out of what you’ve got. If you’re a bad cook, they can give you lots of good food, but you make miserable food out of it. It’s this skill that you develop right here, right now. And John Lee expands on the Buddha’s image. He says if you’re a good cook, you don’t just find one thing that your employer likes and just keep fixing that day after day. Because the employer is going to get tired of it. So you want to vary your offerings. Try long breathing for a while, then when you’re tired of long breathing, you can try short breathing. Fast, slow. Think of the breath as a whole body process. And if your mind wanders away, just bring it back. Remind yourself that the important things you’re going to learn about here, right here, where the mind and the body meet, at the breath. Because it’s right here that you’re creating any suffering that weighs down the mind. If you don’t create suffering here, nothing else weighs down the mind. We’re not here to try to figure out the nature of reality outside. We’re simply trying to figure out how the mind makes its choices and how it can make it more skillfully. And how it can learn not to burden itself with unnecessary pain and suffering. It can provide itself with an actual sense of joy. The stresses of the world come in two kinds. They can be illustrated by a story. And John Sawatt went on when we were up at the top of the hill, pointing to the mountain over there on the horizon. And he asked, “Is that mountain heavy?” Now you know when John asks a question like this, it’s a trick question. So everybody who was listening waited to get the answer. He says, “If you try to lift it, it’s heavy on you. If you don’t try to lift it, then even though it may be heavy in itself, it’s not heavy on you. And that’s what matters.” The fact that the mountain is heavy, that’s called stress in what are called the three characteristics, or the three perceptions. That’s just the way things are. But the fact that you’re lifting it, that’s the problem. And the weight that comes when you lift it, that’s stress in the four noble truths. In other words, that’s stress that comes from craving, involved with clinging. And that’s something that doesn’t have to be there. The mountain is going to be heavy on its own, whether you think of picking it up or not. But you have the choice. Are you going to pick it up? If you do, you’re going to suffer. Just leave it there. So you want to look for how you’re clinging, how you’re craving, in the present moment that would lead you to pick up unnecessary burdens. And when you’re coming from a place of well-being, with a breath, it’s more easy to see that a lot of the burdens you take on are unnecessary. So that’s what we’re concerned with. We’re not here to study mountains. We’re here to study the act of picking up mountains. Why do people do that? Well, they’re hungry. They want some pleasure, and they think they’ll get some pleasure doing this. So what we have to learn as we meditate is to see that whatever pleasures we get out of holding on to things in the world are outweighed by the stress and dis-ease that come when you try to carry things around, when you try to take possession of things. And we do it through three things, through activities. The Buddha calls it sankara. And one of them is bodily sankara, which is the way you breathe. There’s an intentional element in the way you breathe. So learn how to intend that you breathe well. Then there’s verbal fabrication. That’s the way you talk to yourself. The topics you choose to talk about and the things you say. We tend to do that in ignorance too. That’s why we suffer. And then there’s mental fabrication. The perceptions you hold in mind, the images you hold in mind. You identify this is this and that’s that. And the feelings, the feelings of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain. When we do these things in ignorance, there’s going to be suffering. This is why our skill starts with focusing on the breath. And then look at how you’re talking to yourself about the breath. And for a large part, in the very beginning of your mind, it’s going to be talking about other things. It drops the breath and goes running after whatever comes past. But you’ve got to learn how to drop those other things, come back to the breath. And find that the breath can be interesting. Especially when you think of it as a whole body process. You can explore how it feels down in your hands, down in your arms, in your shoulders. How does it feel in your feet, in your legs, in your torso, in your head? When you focus on these parts of the body, are you putting too much pressure on the focus, or not enough? You can talk to yourself about these things. And you can change the way you breathe to make it more comfortable. More energizing when you want energy. Relaxing when you want to be relaxed. Because the breath has lots of potentials that we don’t realize because we don’t explore them. We’re too busy looking after other things. But now’s the time to look at your breath, to explore it. To learn about it. And then there are the perceptions that you hold in mind. How do you perceive the breath? When you think of the breath coming in, where does it come in? We’re talking about the breath as not being the air, but being the energy. So when the body expands, where does that sense of expansion come from? And what does get pulled in? There’s a back and forth here. So think of it just as energy. That’s the perception you hold. And that energy can flow anywhere and it can flow in any direction. So what direction feels best? These are things you can explore. And as you explore them, you’re bringing knowledge to this process of fabrication. And you learn about its potentials. You learn about its limitations. When you get really advanced in concentration, the mind gets more and more subtle. All the time. It gets to the point where it doesn’t want to fabricate anything anymore. Even these states of concentration, which can feel very refreshing, very calm, very stable, involve some work. And you realize you’d like to have that sense of stability without the work. That’s when you let go of everything, even the path. You even let go of your sense of self, because your sense of self is made out of these same fabrications. If you still hold on to anything, saying this is me, this is mine, that’s a fabrication you haven’t let go of. So however you define yourself at that point, permanent, impermanent, you’ve got to let it go. But before you let it go, you’re trying to use your sense of self, that you are responsible for what you’re doing right now, and you’re capable of doing it, and you’re going to benefit from it. And you can observe what you’re doing, comment on it, with the hope of making it better. This is how you learn. You learn how to train yourself. Only when you’ve trained yourself in this way do you get to the point where you can let it go. So it’s all a matter of skill. We’re not here to learn about reality outside. That was one of the questions that was posed to me in France. How do you learn about the nature of reality through meditation? And I had to rephrase the question. The Buddha was not concerned with the nature of reality. He was concerned with the problem of suffering, stress, pain. Why do these things weigh down the mind? Why do we weigh ourselves down with them? And meditation teaches us. It shows us how we’re doing that. Because as the mind gets more solidly here in the present moment, clearer and more still in the present moment, it’s going to see these things more clearly. And then it’s going to see that it doesn’t have to do the things that create suffering. It can let them go. That’s what the Buddha taught for. That’s the goal of this skill, the aim of this skill. Why we master this skill. So you take the first step. You don’t have to know all the plan of where this is going to go. Just know it’s going to go to a good place. Then do your best to take this on as a skill. You do something. You commit yourself to trying to do it well. And then you reflect on what you’ve got, what you’ve done, the results you’ve gotten. And if the results are not yet good, you can ask yourself, “What can I change in what I do?” It’s in this way that you take on the Buddha’s training, but you end up training yourself. So you get that you breathe with knowledge and skill. You think with knowledge and skill. You use perceptions with knowledge and skill. That’s when you learn the true meaning of what the Buddha had to teach.

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