

Insight from the Breath

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Think of the breath as medicine for the body and medicine for the mind. The way you breathe can have a huge impact on the other elements in the body. It's a medicine that we tend to overlook but it has a lot to offer to us. It's right there all the time but it's simply matter of learning how to pay attention, to see what it can do for us.

If you pay attention to the breath, you begin to notice that some ways of breathing are uncomfortable and others are more comfortable. Some give you energy and some take it away.

When you've got a disease in the body, some kinds of breathing can actually aggravate the disease and other kinds can help it. So you want to look into this. Experiment with your breathing so that you have a sense of feeling at home here, and that the breath does actually soothe the body and soothes the mind. Or it energizes the mind when the mind needs energy.

The important principle here is that you don't just look at the breath as it is. Actually, there's no way you can do that. There's always some intentional element in the breath. You want to learn how to take advantage of that.

So you change the breathing, watch it and see how that goes; change the breathing in another way, see how that goes, until you find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels really good for you right now. Then stick with it as long as it does feel good. If, after a while, it doesn't feel so good, then you can change again.

What's important is that you pay attention to what's going on in the breath. That can give you a good place to stay. Then learn how to take that with you as you go, that no matter where you go, you've still got the breath inside and you can make it comfortable. That means that you can change your situation. Regardless of how things are outside, you can change the situation inside so that you don't feel so weighed down by things.

It's in this way that we develop not only concentration but also insight. Sometimes we think there are concentration methods and then you drop them and then you do an insight method. But actually the insight comes from trying to keep the mind still, trying to keep the mind at ease in the present moment and developing your discernment to see how to do that really well. You gain insight into the things that pull you away and you gain insight into the ways the mind can be trained not to get pulled away. That's the kind of insight that's really useful.

We read about the insight in books that has to be inconstant, stressful, not-self,

and that only if you think in those terms is it insight. Well, that's not true. Anything that helps put an end to the suffering and stress that you're placing on the mind: That's insight. And the understanding that comes as you learn how to get the mind under your control: That's insight, too.

Because that's the whole purpose of those perceptions of inconstancy, stress and not-self: so that you can comprehend suffering and stress and you can abandon the cause. Whether you're thinking in those terms directly or not, as long as you're able to notice where you're adding unnecessary stress and what you can do to put an end to that, okay, that's what the insight is all about.

So try to appreciate all the breath can do for you and the fact that paying attention to the breath can do an awful lot, both for the body and for the mind, both while you're sitting here and as you go through life wherever you go. You've got a friend inside; you've got medicine inside. You've got food, clothing, shelter, everything right here in the breath if you learn how to take advantage of it.