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Week 3, Working and Playing with the Breath
Maintaining a Stable Center
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Hello. Welcome to the third week of the Tricycle Online Retreat for this month, which is on the topic of working and playing with the breath. As I said at the beginning, we're going to be working on three skills related to developing concentration by working and playing with the breath. The first is learning how to do it, which is the topic we covered in the first week; then learning how to maintain concentration, which is the topic this week, as well as last week, and then learning how to put it to use, which will be the topic next week. Last week we talked about learning how to maintain concentration while you're sitting in formal practice. This week the focus will be more on learning how to maintain a sense of stable center as you go throughout the day.

One of the best ways of building up to this sense of stable center, that you can maintain with the breath, is by working on walking meditation; in fact, that'll be this week's homework: practicing walking meditation. There are basically three things you have to focus on while you're doing this. Instead of focusing on your feet, you'll be focusing on maintaining a sense of the center that we talked about last week—the spot in the body where the breath energy seems most sensitive to any developing tension and where the mind feels that it's easiest to stay focused. Try to maintain that sense of the center as you do your walking meditation. Now the pace you follow as you walk, where you put your hands... that's pretty much up to you. If you want to read some more specific instructions on the topic look into the section on walking meditation in the book *With Each and Every Breath*. But right here let's just talk about the fact that this is one of the main things that you're going to be focusing on: maintaining a sense of center with breath in some central part of the body.

The second thing you'll be focusing on, of course, is the fact that you are moving. Now, you don't want the fact that you're moving to distract you from your center, so this will be part of the skill. Like learning how to chew gum and walk at the same time, you are going to keep your focus and walk at the same time. And then finally there will be the events around you—in this case, the cawing of the crows, the sound of the wind, whatever. And while you're doing walking meditation the outside distractions are pretty minimal, but you do have to be alert to what's going on around you. This is one of the areas in which you begin to gain a sense of the movements of your mind and learn how to watch the movements of the mind without following them. In other words, you have to look ahead of yourself when you're doing walking meditation so you don't run into obstacles at the end of the path, or walk off the path as you're following it. You have to be sensitive to how you're turning around, what your surroundings are, as well as the

mind, which will be moving around from the center to catch these other things and then coming back to the center. You want to learn how to watch that as it happens and learn how to keep your observer in place even though you are paying attention to things in addition to the center as you protect it.

This suite of skills is important as you go through the day, because these are precisely the issues that you're going to be facing as you try to maintain a sense of being, centered with a breath, in the course of your daily activities at work, at home, or just walking around. Whatever your activities, you want to be able to maintain your sense of center; don't let your activities distract you from that and try to maintain the center even though other things are going around you, and do not let yourself get distracted by the things outside. In other words, there will be some movement of the mind but you want to maintain that sense that your "observer" is right here, even though the mind moves in other directions as well. Now this may sound like one more task to add to your suite of multitasks and it's best not to see it that way; see it more as providing yourself with a foundation from which to do the other tasks as you go through the day. This sense of being centered gives you a real sense of stability. You're not so easily knocked off by other people's words, or other people's actions because you're going to be right here. If you think of multitasking as juggling, this is not one more ball to juggle; this is putting you on a good solid floor so that you can be more skillful in your juggling. If you see it that way then it's a lot easier to maintain this sense of being centered and stabilized as you engage in other activities.

A few important points to keep in mind are that working with the breath this way gives you something interesting to do during the course of the day, when other things are not pressing. If you're sitting in a meeting and it's very boring, you can sit there, focus on the breath and bliss out and nobody else has to know. This can be kind of your own secret little entertainment that you're doing for yourself. That right there is a very useful skill to have, so that whenever you find that you're not engaged in anything, you've got something engaging to do. Also think of this as having a safe shield that you're able to develop from that sense of center that can then spread your awareness to fill your body. This protects you from picking up energies from other people.

You may have noticed that when you're talking with someone who's sad, you start picking up that person's energy, particularly if you feel bad. It's an empathetic thing to do; you kind of suck in their energy so that somehow you're feeling the same thing that they're feeling. You end up feeling pretty miserable and you're not helping the other person and you're certainly not helping yourself and it's not making you necessarily more sensitive to how they feel. When you fully inhabit your space and you can watch them, you're actually more sensitive to how that person is rather than feeling with your own imagination how you feel that person might be feeling.

So you have this sense of safe shield, but it should not make you cold or indifferent. This is an important point to remind yourself of as you're going through the day trying to remain this sense of center that you're not becoming more indifferent, you're not becoming more aloof. Other people may sense that you are not pulling in their energy, and they may resent it, but that's their problem; it's not really yours because by pulling in their energy you're not helping them at all. And by the fact that you're keeping your body filled with your own sense of healthy breath energy, as I said, helps you from picking up random energies that other people might be sending out.

Also as you develop this sense of a center, you begin to notice the issues that tick you off, the issues that knock you off of your center, and this is an important step in gaining insight into exactly which issues distract you. Sometimes it's things people do. Sometimes it's things that come out of your own mind. The Buddha uses the word *asava*, which can mean effluent—things that come flowing out of your mind that many times are more troublesome than things that are coming in from outside. I mean, people can say outrageous things, but sometimes you'll find yourself wanting to be angry about something and yet, nobody has said anything outrageous. You're out there looking for what's going to be outrageous. I mean, this is why we have talk radio; people want to be angry and so they go looking for things to get angry about. People want to be lustful so they look for things to develop lust around. So it is not so much the events from outside that are causing the problem; many times it's this sense of something flowing out of your own mind. You wouldn't be able to see that unless you begin to observe how you are reacting when people do outrageous things. If there's anger that's developing, first take note where in the breath the tension is happening. If you become more sensitive to the breath energies of the body, by now you should be able to sense where something distorted or something unhealthy is developing in your breath energy and you'll want to do something about it.

Oftentimes, as I said, if you're focused on the sensitive spot that tends to pick up the tension earliest, as soon as the tension develops you want to disperse it. That puts you in a position where you can, rather than feeling like you've got something bottled up or something that you've got to get out of your system. Disperse the energy and then look at the situation, and ask what really needs to be done now? What would be the wisest thing? Is this the right time to say something? So, again, you're changing the balance of power by giving yourself a secure comfortable center inside. You're not picking up negative energies, and when negative energies do develop, you've got a way of dispersing them so they don't take over and force your hand or your speech in ways that you're going to regret. So you're developing a safe place here as you go through the day, and having that sense of safety is an important way of developing a good solid center for keeping the mind from picking up unnecessary stress. When people have been acting in an irritating way, a lot of the time you just keep collecting and collecting and collecting and find you've got enough that you feel angry. But if you find that you don't collect, if you've

got this sense of settled center, a sense of open center right here, you will find it a lot easier to deal with specific issues as they come up, without the anger building or irritation building in the way that leads to doing unskillful things.

So that's the discussion to maintaining your center as you go through the day. Now, as I mentioned, working with the breath in this way is bolstered by doing walking meditation, because that introduces you, in a very simple way, to the areas that you have to be responsible for, maintaining your center even though you're moving and even though things are happening around you. So the homework for this week is, in addition to doing sitting meditation, to do some walking meditation. You can look in the book *With Each and Every Breath* for specific instructions, and as the book says, you can either do a dedicated walking meditation or you can try a meditative stroll to see if that works—whichever way you find is helpful in developing this sense of center that becomes your default mode of where you're going to stand as you juggle the other things that come up in the course of the day. So that's the third week, and look forward to seeing you next week!