Reexploring the Breath

November, 2002

We spend so much of our lives living in our heads that an important part of the meditation is learning how to get back and inhabit your whole body. So when you’re working on the breath, try to be in the body as much as you can. Notice how the breathing feels. Notice when you breathe in, where do you have the sensations that let you know that you’re breathing in? They may or may not correspond to your preconceived notions of what the breath is like. But again, you’re trying to get away from your preconceived notions. Where the breath comes in, where the breath goes out, how it comes in, how it comes out, these are things that are important to explore. And it’s important to learn how to think in new ways about the breathing. Sometimes we think that the more solid parts of the body pull the breath in and push it out. Can you switch that around? Can the breath be the force that comes in and animates the other parts of the body? And that sensation of pulling the breath in, what is that sensation, aside from a more subtle kind of breath energy? What this means is that you’re exploring the breathing, both from the physical side and from the mental side. Because the breath is one of those unusual bodily processes that can be automatic but also can be willed, which makes it a very interesting place to explore, to see where the borderline between those two things is. One place to look is to notice immediately, as you focus on the breath, what happens to the breath energy. What ways do you change it simply by focusing on it? And when you focus on it, what assumptions do you bring in? Learn how to question those assumptions so that you can see them more clearly. As I said once before, it’s not that we’re trying to find a true conception of the breath. We’re here to understand the process of cause and effect in the mind and the body, or in terms of name and form, as the texts call it. But in particular, what do your concepts, what do your mental pictures about the breath do to the process? What do they do to the sensation of breathing? The way you hold your body, that’s also a part of the process of breathing as well. Which parts of the body do you tend to tense up? Which parts tend to go numb? Which parts tend to disappear? Learn to compensate for that as you focus on the breath, not only as a learning exercise but also as a way of giving the mind a good place to settle down. That means we have to make the body comfortable. A body that has parts that are tensed up or the energy flow is blocked, that’s not a good place to stay. So go through the body and survey to see what areas do you keep tensed up. Can you consciously relax them? One way of doing this is to go through and consciously tense every muscle you can notice. Tense it up and then consciously relax. See what that does, what that tells you about the body that you didn’t know before, that you were cutting off from yourself. There are lots of issues to explore with the breath, and lots of ways of using the breath, too. John Lee talks about it as being a medicine. The active ingredient, he says, is the mindfulness, the alertness that you bring to the process. The breath itself is more of an inactive ingredient. But sometimes the breath itself is what needs to be treated. The way we breathe is stunted. We’re only partial, constricted. As a result, our whole sense of the body gets lopsided. We’re talking today about having a much stronger sense of one side of the body than the other. Well, you can learn to compensate for that, because the parts that are on the other side, if they don’t get enough breath energy, tend to suffer. The functioning of the body gets unbalanced. So you can use the breath as a conscious way of treating the imbalances in the body. That not only makes it a more comfortable place to stay in the present, but also helps with the health of the body, so that every organ in the body gets its fair share of breath energy, its fair share of circulation. So there are many benefits that come from working with the breath, physical benefits and mental benefits. There’s lots to explore. Sometimes we sit here breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out, and it gets kind of dull, as if there was no work to be done at all. There’s plenty of work to be done in terms of balancing things out between body and mind, balancing things out within the body, exploring issues within the mind as they relate to the breath. Questioning your concepts and perceptions about the breath. Trying to come up with other concepts and perceptions that help the mind settle down with a greater sense of security, a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of well-being, that help the mind settle down for longer and longer periods of time. This is a fascinating place to explore. There are so many issues. How does the body relate to the mind? How does the mind relate to the body? The breath is where they meet, so this is where you’re going to learn about these things. When a particular type of thought comes into the mind, where do you feel it in the breath? Which parts of the body get tensed up, say, when there’s anger? Which parts get tensed up when there’s fear? That feeling of anxiety in the pit of your stomach, what does that have to do with the way you breathe? How did your breathing bring it on? These are things we can explore, but you have to be very, very sensitive to what’s going on. Opening up to the sensation of breathing, opening up to the whole process of just being in the body. I was reading today someone saying that the awakened mind state is one that is welcoming to all direct experience. Well, the practice doesn’t stop just there with being welcoming. You open up, but then you open up for what purpose? Not simply to accept things, but to learn about them, to learn how to be more and more skillful in how you approach things, to get more benefit out of the breath, to get more benefit out of being able to sit here for long periods of quietude. We’ve got this opportunity to explore. What are we going to do with it? If you find the mind settling down and don’t know what to do, explore this issue of the breath. Exactly what is the breath energy in the body? Which parts of the body are being starved of breath energy? Which parts are doing too much of the work in bringing the breath in and out? When there’s pain or other illness in the body, how can your breathing help alleviate it? John Fulham once made a comment. He said, “How do you think those monks go out in the forest and stay for long periods of time without doctors around, without anybody to look after them?” He said, “They have to work with the breath.” It’s a situation like that that forces you to make the most of what little you’ve got. But then as you really get to know the breath, you begin to realize it’s not just a little here. There’s an awful lot that’s going on. You’re in a position where you can have more of an effect on the health of the body, the health of the mind, than you might otherwise have supposed. When we live in a place where there’s lots of medicine, lots of food, lots of conversation, lots of contact with other people, we start depending on them for our health, and we depend on them for our well-being. This is one of the important aspects of solitude. You go out, take as little as you can with you, and then make the most of what you’ve got. Start exploring the potentials within the body. Start exploring the potentials within the mind, and see what benefit you can get out of them. In other words, we’re not here simply to be equanimous and welcoming to whatever happens. But we look at things in terms of cause and effect by exploring their potentials, by exploring their uses, and seeing how far they can take us, both in terms of physical well-being and in terms of mental well-being. What does it mean to have a mind that’s totally free of disease? The Buddha said that’s a reference for the realization of nirvana. He says nothing less than that can be counted as true health for the mind. But there are stages that work in that direction. You get the mind at deeper and deeper stages of concentration, there’s a greater and greater sense of well-being. Then you find that that well-being is nourishing. There’s a verse in the Dhammapada that says, “How happily we live, we who have nothing, we feed on rapture like the radiant gods.” The rapture really is nourishing, both physically and mentally. On days when you’re fasting, try to get the mind into a state of concentration where there is a strong feeling of rapture, and see what it does for the body. Stay there as long as you can. Then you find that you can survive and thrive on less food, thrive on less companionship, and thrive on the potentials that are already here in your body and mind. So we open up to our present experience, not simply to learn to stop being neurotic about things and learning how to accept things as they are. That’s simply the first step. Things don’t really care whether you accept them or not. They’re just going to be the way they are. But if you simply allow them to be the way they are without trying to get any more benefit out of them, you never really learn anything about them. It’s like learning about eggs. You can sit and stare at an egg for days after days. You can learn how to accept the egg, learn how to love the egg. You don’t understand anything about the egg. If you want to understand the egg, you take it and you put it in a pan, turn on the heat, and see what happens when you put it over low heat, when you stir it, what happens when you put it into water and boil it. And you have something to eat. You’ve gained knowledge. You’ve gained nourishment. Simply by learning about the things that are right at hand around you. With the meditation, we take it an even step further inward. You learn about the potentials in the body. You learn about the potentials in the mind. Exploring what’s here. Seeing what uses you have for different types of breathing, what uses you have for different ways of focusing the mind. And as your approach gets more and more interested in this process of being skillful, it spreads out to other areas of life as well. How to be more skillful in your dealings with others. How to learn from your mistakes. How to develop the process of skillfulness so it can take you all the way to true happiness. After all, this process of skillful and unskillful is probably the most basic teaching the Buddha had. When one of his followers was asked about what position the Buddha took on different issues of the day, the follower said, “He doesn’t take any position on these issues, whether the world was eternal or not eternal, whether it was finite or infinite, and so on down the line.” So the questioner said, “Then he’s a nihilist. He doesn’t teach anything at all. He makes no distinctions at all.” And the Buddhist follower said, “No, that’s not true. He makes a distinction between what’s skillful and what’s unskillful.” That’s the basic starting point. That means, of course, that we don’t simply memorize what the Buddha had to say about what’s skillful and unskillful. We try to apply that approach to our lives, the issues in our lives, starting with the simple ones. If you’re sitting here and it’s uncomfortable, what are you going to do? Well, there may be a more skillful way to breathe in and out, so the experience can be more pleasurable. Whatever issues come up, try to find the most skillful way of approaching them. When you learn how to think in that way, you cut through a lot of unnecessary verbiage in the mind. Then you get the mind into a position where it starts thinking automatically in terms of the vulnerable truths, without you having planned it. Because the vulnerable truths come out of this question of what’s skillful and what’s not. So we’re here to meditate to gain knowledge. What kind of knowledge is it? The knowledge that comes from practicing being skillful, beginning with how we breathe. Simple things, how we breathe, how we hold the body, how we try to focus the mind in the present moment, how we try to be mindful and alert, which are two of the most basic functions of the mind. We step back and we relearn these things. It’s often by questioning basics, exploring the basic issues, that we really come to radically new understandings. So we sit here day after day after day, simply trying to be with the breath. Once you’re with the breath and learning how to use it skillfully, we do this because it’s one of the most basic processes in life. The more you understand the basic process, the more that reverberates through your understanding of everything else.

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