Your Primary Experience

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The breath is where the mind and the body meet. If it weren’t for the breath, there’d be no sense of the body. It’s the medium through which we sense the body. It’s the medium through which we move the body. One of the big shifts in breath meditation comes when you realize that your primary experience of the body is the breath. We start out with the idea that the body is a solid lump and we’ve got to pull the breath in and pull the breath out through the mechanics of having a solid and liquid body. But if you learn to see that the breath is your primary experience of the whole body, every sensation you have of the body is due to the breath, that changes your sense of what it means to breathe, what’s needed to breathe, how much pressure you have to put on different parts of the body, which parts in the body the breath can come in. The breath is basic to the whole body. That means that you can pretty much direct breath energy as you will. Breathe in and out any part of the body. You can breathe in and out the spaces between your toes. You can breathe in and out your backbone. When you allow yourself to think in this way, you find that it opens up a lot of unexplored territory in the body. It also opens up a lot of ways in which you can relate to the body to make it more comfortable. It’s what is a more pleasant place to sit for an hour, a more pleasant place to settle in. Because if you’re constantly dealing with unpleasant breath sensations, in the sense that you’ve got to pull this in or pull that out, you’re not going to want to stay. But if you can realize you have more leeway in dealing with the breath than you might have thought, you can start exploring to see how far that leeway goes and what it can do for you, both in terms of helping the health of the body and in terms of creating a better place for the mind to settle down. So that you can be friendly with your meditation object instead of regarding it as your enemy or as an adversary. Something that you have to grit your teeth and just squeeze out your concentration. It can be done, but there’s a more intelligent way of doing it, a way of relating to the breath that gives you a greater sense of well-being. And it’s more stable because it has that sense of well-being. It feels good to be here. Normally, wherever it feels good to be, you’re going to want to stay. Wherever it feels tight or tense or restrictive, you’re going to want to get out as fast as possible. It’s interesting that when the Buddha talks about the factors that go into determination, when you make up your mind you’re going to do anything, the first factor is discernment, trying to figure out the least strenuous, the least wasteful way of going about whatever your goal is. That’s an important part of the practice. It’s the beginning part of any kind of exercise of your willpower. It’s possible to squeeze the mind and to force things, but the results you get don’t last. So you’re trying to figure out different ways and different approaches for making the breath a pleasant place to be, something you can really stay with solidly. When the mind begins to settle down, then the breath gets more and more subtle because you’re using less oxygen and also losing less oxygen. That enables you to have an even more expansive sense of the breath. It also allows you to be more sensitive to the really subtle things going on in the body, more subtle patterns of tension that you didn’t realize when you were battling with the grosser patterns. So there are many levels you can work through here. As your concentration gets more still, your discernment has the opportunity to be more refined. And as your discernment is more refined, it helps you clean up those patterns of tension in the body, so the concentration can even be more subtle and more still. The two help each other along. Don’t think that you just grit your teeth and do concentration practice until a little light goes off and says, “Now you’re ready for insight. Now you’re ready for discernment.” It doesn’t work that way. The two qualities, what the Buddha calls tranquility and insight, have to go together. First, to create good states of concentration, and then to use that concentration in order to gain more subtle insights. So a good image to keep in mind as you practice is you want to get everybody working together. The body working together with the breath. Get those coordinated, the different breath sensations in the body. Sometimes you find that they seem to be working at cross-purposes. Well, straighten that out. So you don’t have the breath in the stomach fighting with the breath in your back. You have the whole body breathing in together, breathing out together. This way, not only does the body start cooperating, or different parts of the body start cooperating, but the mind can begin to cooperate with the body as well. And the different faculties in the mind that you need. Conviction and the importance of what you’re doing. Persistence in doing it. Mindfulness, concentration, discernment. They all work together as you realize the importance of creating this safe place inside. Because you look at the world outside. What do you hear? What do you see? If you have a TV set, they keep replaying September 11th. What do you hear? You hear people talking, worried about their security. We live in a world where all sorts of things can happen. And if you don’t have a secure place inside, you’re just setting yourself up for all kinds of suffering. The very first verse in the Theragatha, the verses of the Elder Monks, the monk is sitting in his hut and a rainstorm comes up. He says, “Well, go ahead if you want, and rain, because my hut is well sealed.” This is the kind of space you want to create inside. As long as you’re looking for your happiness, or looking for your gratification of things outside, your hut is wide open for all the storms that are going to come. But if you look inside, that in and of itself starts sealing up the roof, sealing up the cracks in the walls, giving you windows, and doors that you can open and close when you want. When things get difficult, you’ve got a safe place to stay. And when people have safe places to stay, it’s good not only for themselves, but also for everybody else around them. Because if you don’t have a safe place to stay, you go running around pestering other people. But if you have a good place to stay, you’re not placing any burden on anyone else, and you’re giving them a good example. This is how a good hut is built. This is how a safe place is created. It starts by learning to be really sensitive to what’s going on right here, being very sensitive to the breathing process, because that’s your primary experience of the present moment. And as you learn how to work with that, then the present moment does become a better and better place to stay. Because you can choose where exactly in the present moment you’re going to focus your attention, which qualities you’re going to develop, which sensations you’re going to develop and work with. We have this huge array of choices all around us, and many of them are choices that are going to lead to suffering. But there are some choices that lead to peace, that lead to well-being. They’re offered as sensations. So you make up your mind which sensations you’re going to focus on and how you’re going to develop them. So the mind can have a good, comfortable place to stay, a place where it can see things clearly, where it doesn’t feel threatened, doesn’t feel put upon by anything at all. So when the rain does fall, your roof is sealed. And even if the rain doesn’t fall, you’ve got a good place to stay anyhow. you

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