Web of Breath, A

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Wind, in the Pali Canon, is a symbol for the ways of the world. Sometimes they’re gentle, sometimes they’re strong, and they can blow from every which way. The important thing in our practice is not to allow our minds to get blown around by them. Just as there are eight directions around the horizon, the four cardinal directions and the four subordinate directions, the texts say there are eight ways of the world. There’s gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure and pain. That’s pretty much what the world has to offer. Notice that these things come in pairs, the desirable side and the undesirable side. You can’t have one without the other, which means that if you hope to place your happiness on the desirable side, the undesirable side is going to have to come as well. So any happiness that’s placed there is bound to get blown away. This is why we have to look inside. As soon as you place your hopes for happiness on anything outside, it’s like those clouds or cushions out in front of the cell this morning. They’re pretty light. They get blown away. What you need to do is give your mind some ballast, bring it into the body, and try to fill the body with your awareness. As the texts say, every part of your body is filled with your awareness, but nothing of the awareness leaks outside. When the mind and the body are together like this, they build up a kind of force field so that things outside can’t permeate. The image they give in the texts is of a hardwood door. The ways of the world come thrown at the door, and they’re like a ball of string thrown against the door. It just bounces right back. The ordinary mind, though, leaves lots of openings for the ways of the world to come in. The image for that is of a ball of clay. You throw a stone into the ball of clay, and it makes a big dent. It lodges itself in the clay. So we try to build up this force field here by being consistent. As soon as you let there be a slightest lapse, there’s an opening. But first you have to start small. As the John Lee once said, “If you’re not willing to start small, you’ll never get things that will grow large.” People who start out wanting to do the whole thing all at once end up not getting anything done. You have to go through the practice step by step, bit by bit. Start with one spot that you can stay focused on, and then move to another little spot you can stay focused on. Work through the body step by step by step, and you’ll discover lots of interesting things that you would have missed if you tried to do everything all at once. Subtle patterns of tension, subtle areas of disconnection that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. If you look very carefully and are willing to keep your focus small, just the amount that you can handle, you find that you see things that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. You can work through things you wouldn’t have been able to work through otherwise if you kept your self-focus on a broad canvas. Focus on what you can handle, and you find that as you work with what you can handle, your strength grows. You can start handling larger and larger areas, larger and larger issues, with skill and with finesse, because you work up to them gradually. This is what I even know the texts say. Step number three of breath meditation is be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. John Lee recommends that you go through the body section by section, bit by bit, before you work on that whole body awareness, so that when you finally do get there, you can maintain it and everything is connected. Working through the body section by section allows you to work through these areas of disconnect, these areas of blockage. That can keep whole sections of your body cut off. Once you’ve worked through them, all you have to do is focus on one spot in the body, and everything is connected right there. It’s like you’ve created a web throughout the body, like a spider’s web. The spider stays on one spot of the web, but because everything is connected, the slightest vibration in any part of the web alerts the spider that something’s there. So the spider goes scurrying out to see what it is. It’s a bug. It takes care of the bug. It goes back to where it was before, ready for the next signal from the web. So you’re creating this web throughout the body. You do your best to keep it connected. The more tightly you connect the weave here, in other words, the larger the number of connections you can create, the more stable the concentration will be when you finally do start expanding awareness to fill the whole body. So you breathe in with the whole body, out to every pore, because you’ve explored them all. They talk about the two kings of Thailand who probably were the best rulers that Thailand has had, Rama IV and Rama V. Both of them spent a lot of time going incognito. Rama IV was a monk before he was a king. He apparently visited almost every province in the country. And as far as anyone can tell, he was just an ordinary monk. And as a result, he got to see things he wouldn’t have seen if he had gone out as a king in all of his splendor and with all of his retainers. He saw things as they actually were, down on the ground level. Rama V, his son, did somewhat the same thing. He would dress up as an ordinary person and go up and down the rivers. Stop off at this village, stop off at that village. People could sense right away that he wasn’t a local person, but they had no idea he was king. That was much easier for him to figure out, to learn what people were thinking, what was important to them. They could sort of see behind the mask that they would have presented to him if he was king. This is the advantage of making yourself small. You see things that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise if you tried to keep yourself big. So go through the body, bit by bit by bit. Take the practice step by step by step, the steps you can manage, so that you can do them well. When you do the small steps well, then the bigger steps become easier, and you do them with more finesse. You see things you wouldn’t have seen otherwise, because this is what the practice is all about. It’s in the seeing. So you’re trying to make your awareness as refined as possible, as sensitive to the little things. Don’t overlook the little things, because they’re important. The discernment is in the details. So as you’re working on concentration, try to establish a foothold in one part of the body so that the breath is comfortable, feels easy, and you have a sense of stability. Then you can start spreading that sense of stability out into other areas of the body. See where it seeps through. See which sections seem to connect up easily, and which other ones are more difficult to connect. Then you explore those. You don’t have to be in a great hurry to do this. There was once a student of Ajahn Fueng’s. He told her to contemplate the hair on her head. After five minutes, she said, “Oh, I’ve contemplated it.” He said, “No, that’s too fast.” He said, “Imagine you pull out all your hair and then you replant it one strand at a time. See how far you get in an hour.” She said afterwards that she learned an awful lot more about that meditation topic in that one hour than she had in many hours of doing things quickly and sloppily, even though she didn’t replant her whole head. But it’s in the patience and the willingness to go step by step by step, look after the details, make sure everything is neatly taken care of. That’s how things are allowed to grow inside the mind, grow in your concentration. Remember the redwoods in Northern California. They start from tiny seeds. They grow to be enormous and they last long. Your concentration can start from a tiny seed, as long as you look after it with patience. Don’t try to push it too fast.

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