Interest in the Breath, An

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The trick to staying with a breath is to take an interest in it. It’s like striking up a friendship with a person. Many times you have to take an interest first before you find out what an interest in the person is. Someone who may seem quiet and unassuming may turn out to be bright, witty, loyal—all the things you’re looking for in a friend. But they don’t necessarily go around advertising the fact. It’s the same with the breath. At the beginning, the breath just looks like it’s in and out, in and out, and that’s about it. But if you take an interest, you find there’s a lot more. The different ways you breathe, the different ways the breath can flow in the body. If you look carefully at the simple sensation of breathing, you find that it may not at all correspond with your preconceived notions about how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out, and the possibilities for having a comfortable breath. There are a lot more than you might have imagined. And the whole question of what you can sense when you pay attention to the breath in the body has a lot more to offer. Sometimes you find you can actually sense the breath energy around the body, around the arms, around the legs. It’s there. Some people sense it, some people don’t. But unless you pay attention, there’s no way you’re going to sense it. So take an interest in this process of energy flowing through the body. Where does it start? Is the in-breath one thing and the out-breath another, or are they connected? Are they part of the same thing? When the in-breath comes in, where does it come in? Where is the signal that tells you, “Okay, now is the time to breathe in, now is the time to breathe out”? A lot of these decisions are made on automatic pilot. So you have to look for them kind of out of the blue. You can consciously make the decisions. In the beginning, you find that you’re a little clumsy, but after a while, over time, you get more and more sensitive. As you get more sensitive, more precise, the breath actually becomes better when you’re paying attention. All too often, in the beginning of the meditation, as soon as you pay attention to the breath, you tighten up, you force it too much. You’re the son of the present moment. The present of the company is suddenly coming in and taking over and wanting to show you, “You know a thing or two. You’re going to make some changes around here.” Of course, you screw things up. But how did the present of the company get to run things so well? Just over time, through experience, watching, testing a little here, testing a little there. After a while, you become more and more experienced. So in the beginning, you test things just a little bit. Push it a little bit longer, push it a little bit shorter, see what happens. Then learn how to make it longer and shorter without pushing, just simply thinking longer, thinking shorter, thinking breath going down to the body, down to the legs, down through the feet. If there’s a spot of tension or tightness anywhere in the body, think of the breath going right through it. If there are parts of the body you don’t sense, in other words, your shoulder seems to be missing, or part of your arm, locate your neck on one side and locate the elbow on the other side. So you go, “Where do the neck and the elbow connect?” There’s your shoulder. It may not have been where you thought it was. There’s lots to explore. And as you do it, you begin to realize you’re not discovering things only about the physical process of breathing, but also about the role that perception plays in the breathing. How your mental image of the breath affects the way you actually breathe. Which breath sensations you notice, which ones you haven’t been noticing because they didn’t fit in with your preconceived notion. If you expand your concept of breath to include all the energy in the body, you start noticing a lot more. And certain patterns of tension that you felt in the body before, which seemed acceptable because you told yourself, “Well, that’s simply the solidity of the body.” When you see it as an aspect of energy, though, you begin to realize this energy is blocked. And you try to untangle it, tracing through the different passageways and seeing where the blockage is. And so you learn a lot about a lot of different faculties of the mind. What attention does, what mindfulness does, what your perceptions do. Concentration is called a perception attainment. In fact, all the levels of concentration, all the way up to the dimension of nothingness, are perception attainments. They’re attained by the perception you hold in your mind. As you’re focused on the breath, that becomes your main perception. And you’re learning how to apply the perception of breath to different things. You expand the range of that perception until you feel that the whole body is breathing. The whole body is breathing in. The whole body is breathing out. Some of it was happening before. Some of it required a little help on your part. And as you take an interest in it, you begin to get absorbed without you even trying to worry about it. What are the factors of absorption? Do I have direct authority? Do I have thought? Do I have evaluation? You don’t have to think about it. Just get interested in the breath. Play with it. Find ways of breathing that you enjoy and stick with them. And you find you get all the factors of jhana without having to look them up in the recipe book and pull them out of the cupboard. They grow naturally out of your interest. Out of your experimentation. One of the reasons we’re taught to deal with the breath first is because it sharpens our powers of observation. There does come a point in the meditation where the breath becomes so pervasive throughout the body. Everything becomes so well-connected that the need to breathe in, breathe out, grows weaker and weaker. It’s like you have a field of breath energy in there and everything is healthy. It’s all full. All the channels are open. The energy is flowing freely. To the point where it’s funny, it’s paradoxical. The flow doesn’t necessarily mean that you feel a little wave of breath coming down your head and then following it down your back. It’s a sense that all the channels are open and they’re full. That’s when the breath gets more and more refined to the point where it finally gets still. Or even if it’s not totally still, it’s like the body is like a large ice cube and there’s this vapor exchange at the surface. John Lee uses this image a lot. It’s like the vapor coming off of an ice cube. It’s not that the body feels heavy or frozen. It’s just that there’s a lot of stillness and there’s a little vapor exchange. Finally, that grows still. Then you find that as the breath grows still, your sense of the body begins to change. Because it was the movement of the breath that defined for you where the outline of the body was. As soon as it gets still, you begin to realize that that sense of outline is arbitrary. It’s one of your perceptions. It has its uses, but you can also put it aside. Then you just stay with that perception of the body here, without a clearly defined border. The fact that you’ve trained your perceptions through dealing with the breath enables them to be more precise. So you can be very clear about the fact of exactly what perception you’re holding on to, which perceptions you’re dropping. Until the body feels like a mist, just sensation atoms. Then you have the choice of focusing on the space between the atoms. That’s fun, because you begin to realize the space has no boundaries. It’s a dimension that’s there all the time. You can tune into it. Even when you’re not really in strong concentration, you can still have a sense of the space. That’s one of the places you can go. Then you can let go of the sensation of space. Not after a day or two, but after staying with space for quite a while. You really want to get on familiar terms with it. Be very precise in that perception, so that when you finally see where precisely that perception is, which part of the mind is saying “space,” you can drop it and see what’s left. This is how John Foon would teach the various stages of absorption. He wouldn’t tell you what to pick up after having dropped it. He’d say, “Drop this and see what’s left.” Then drop that and see what’s left. If you were in a state of just simply all-around awareness, seeming to have no boundaries, just aware, knowing, knowing, knowing, when he had you drop that one, he’d say, “Drop the oneness.” In each case, having dropped one perception, another one would come up, all the way up to the state of nothingness, a dimension of nothingness, each of which depends on a perception. You see how the perception interacts with your actual feeling that goes along with it. But to get there and to be solid, you need the training you’ve had with the breath, because the breath is what makes the perceptions more precise. It also allows you to see, one, how arbitrary they are, and two, what influence they have. The perceptions when you leave breath have to be a lot more subtle. The sensations you pick up will have to be more subtle as well. You haven’t trained with the breath; you just can’t see the distinctions. At the same time, you can’t go floating around in these formless states all the time. You need the breath as an anchor, even if it’s just the still breath. It’s your anchor. It’s what gives the energy to the meditation. It keeps you working, because the formless states can get kind of lazy. But as you work with the breath, you begin to realize that the body needs care, it needs attention. You use the breath, you use your perceptions of the breath, to treat it. You treat the body from within, and you begin to realize the body is a lot healthier when you do treat it this way. This gives you another reason to take an interest in the breath—free medicine. No matter what happens with healthcare in America, you have your own internal medicine here if you explore it, test it, experiment with it. John Foon used to call this “the grass at the corral gate.” Most of the cattle, as they leave the corral, they go running out looking for grass elsewhere. It’s the smart cow that looks for the fact that there’s grass growing right at that place, right next to the gate. At least you get a little nibble before you have to go running out someplace else. Here’s the breath, right here, and it has a lot of different potentials, both for the body and for the mind. It’s the wise person, the discerning person, who learns how to make use of things that are free, things that are right here. So you use the breath to treat the body, you use the breath to train the mind. The breath responds very quickly to things going on in the mind. If you want to learn about the impact of perception on your view of reality, the breath is one of the best places to look. As soon as you change your perception of the breath, the actual physical experience of the breath is going to change as well. Once you get more and more precise in seeing these relationships, then when you move on to the formless states, your sensitivity has been changed and you can stay in them for longer periods of time. They become more solid, sure. So there’s a lot to the breath. One of Ajaan Lee’s friends, a monk who also studied with Ajaan Mun, said, “There’s a difference between seeing and not seeing.” He asked him one time, “What is there to see in the breath? It’s just in and out.” How can you gain any discernment with the breath? Ajaan Lee said, “Well, if that’s all you see, then that’s all there is. The difference lies in your seeing, and the difference in the seeing lies in whether or not you take an interest.” So learn how to take an interest. Take an interest in what’s going on here in your body. Because, as the Buddha said, those who keep their mindfulness diverse in the body are the ones who are headed for the Deathless. And even before you’re at the Deathless, there’s an awful lot to learn. An awful lot to discover. So even though the breath may seem unpreproposing, remember, some of the most interesting and fascinating people in the world are quiet. You have to take an interest in them before they open up. And it’s the same with the breath.

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