Breath Energies

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An important principle in practicing meditation is that you be interested in your topic. If you find it boring, you’re not going to stay with it very long. So when you look at the breath, what is there to be interested in? Some people see it’s just in and out. One of Ajahn Lee’s friends once complained to him about this very point. “What is there?” he said. “Just in and out.” And Ajahn Lee said that if that’s all you see in the breath, that’s all you’re going to get out of it. The problem isn’t with the breath, it’s with the way we look. Because what is this? It’s the basic energy that holds the body together. It’s the energy that holds the body and mind together. And if you look at it carefully, you see there’s a lot going on with the in-breath and with the out-breath, because it’s related to other types of energy in the body as well. In Thai, they refer to all these kinds of energy as breath. You’ve got the in-and-out breath. Then there’s the energy that runs along the nerves, the energy that runs along the blood vessels, that contracts or relaxes all those little tiny muscles in the walls of the blood vessels. Have you ever looked to see if you can sense that energy? It’s there. If the mind is really quiet, you can see it. Sometimes there’s a sense when you’re breathing in that energy is coming up to the head. Other times, there’s a sense it’s flowing down the shoulders and down the back. When you focus on the upflowing energy or the downflowing energy, what does that do? Does that affect your sense of the body? Sometimes too much upflow can make you tense, can give rise to headaches. Too much downflowing energy can make you sluggish. So how are you going to know what is just right? You have to watch. You have to experiment. This is an important principle in the meditation too, the willingness to experiment. As the Chan Fung once said, if you have to be told everything, you’re never going to learn anything on your own. You’re never going to learn how to look, how to judge the results of your meditation on your own. And if you don’t learn that, where are you going to get any discernment? So it means a willingness to take chances. And see what results. Sometimes you make a mistake. Well, you can learn from the mistake. As the Chan Fung once said, there’s no mistake in meditation that can’t be undone. So you focus on the breath as you experience it. If you can’t yet experience the breath as you experience more subtle levels of breathing, focus on what you can experience. Stay with those, because it’s the staying that makes the mind still, and it’s the stillness that makes the other, more subtle things, apparent. But always be aware there’s more to explore. These are the two most important principles in the exploring and the experimenting. The other two words that the Chan Fung stressed most in his meditation instructions are one, observe, and two, use your imagination. Imagination here doesn’t mean that you think about things far away. You’re usually using your imagination and asking questions about the breath. What would long breathing be like? What would short breathing be like? How about broad breathing? How about narrow breathing? How about, as the Chan Fung says, thinking of the breath coming in the back of the skull, going down the spine. What would that be like? You start with the principles he mentions in his seven steps, but then you can go beyond that. Think of the breath coming in and out the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands. How do you relax the feet and relax the hands to the point where you can actually feel the energy there? So you use your imagination in asking questions, and then you use your powers of observation to see what comes out as a result. That’s how you experiment with the breath. And this is what makes it interesting. It gets to the point where you don’t have to keep telling yourself to stay with the breath, because you find it absorbing. And that provides your foundation for staying in the present moment. If you have to stay by tying the mind down or forcing it too much, eventually you get to the point where it gets tired or it rebels. But if you give it something to play with, you’ve got this big doll right here, the whole body. So you can play with the body. You can play with all the different elements in the body, the sense of warmth, the sense of coolness, the sense of heaviness. There’s plenty to experiment with here in the present moment. Then you can experiment with other things. How long is a good time to sit? Well, you try various lengths of sitting times to see what happens. How long should you sit with pain? Again, try. Be willing to experiment. Be willing to put up with some pain for a while to see what you learn. For it’s this state of mind that gains discernment in a state that’s willing to experiment, so that you learn how to judge things on your own. The texts talk about concentration giving rise to discernment. This is how it happens. It’s not just that you get the mind still and you start seeing things. It’s that you get the mind still and then you learn how to ask questions in that stillness. And you learn how to keep reframing the questions, starting with simple things like the breath and then moving on to pain. Why is there pain in the mind? What do you learn as you take that pain apart in the mind? This morning we had someone ask the question, “How do you get rid of that bothersome sense of self that keeps causing a lot of trouble?” Well, you don’t throw it out once and for all. You peel it away, layer by layer. And where do you look for it? You look for it best where there’s pain. It can be physical pain or mental pain. It’s going to be looking around in there. And if you see it not as a constant thing, this sense of self, but you learn how to see it as something you keep creating over and over and over again in different forms, then you begin to see how you deal with it. When you see how you do it, and you see that it’s not really necessary, then you can let go. For most of us, we have a very solidified idea about our sense of self. We can’t conceive how we could function without it. But when you actually look at how the sense of self is created, you see that it’s constantly recreated all the time. Sometimes you identify with this, sometimes you identify with that. Sometimes you feel you’re the body, sometimes you feel you’re the pain, sometimes you feel you’re the experience. Sometimes you identify with your thoughts, sometimes with the way you label things. There are lots of different selves that you keep making all the time. And when you start seeing them as a process and seeing that they’re not always necessary, and that many times they’re troublemakers, you learn to pare down. You learn the different ways that you create a sense of self. So you have to use the sense of self when it’s useful and necessary, and you can let go of it when it’s not. You find that huge burdens get removed from the mind that way. And you do this, again, by getting the mind still and asking unexpected questions. Learning how to reframe the way you look at your mind, reframe the way you look at yourself, not as a thing but as an activity, as a whole bag full of strategies, all aimed at happiness. Which is why when you see that your sense of self is actually causing suffering, and it’s not necessary, the whole thing short-circuits. Because, after all, what is it there for if not to create happiness? When you see that it’s not doing its expected job, then you drop that particular strategy. And this is how, bit by bit by bit, you start taking the whole problem apart. But it follows the same principle. It follows the breath. If you’ve been breathing in a way that’s uncomfortable, but you look at it carefully, you begin to realize, “Why do you have to breathe that way?” Nobody’s forcing you. There are lots of other ways to breathe much more comfortably. That’s the beginning of discernment. It’s simply that you use that same principle of observing processes as they happen. You peel away the ones that are counterproductive. It’s simply a matter of getting more precise and more and more sensitive as you do this. So this approach of looking at the breath, working with the breath, making it more comfortable, is basic training in the skills that are going to lead to awakening. I’ve got you started on the skills right away. So do your best to perfect them.

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