Full Body Breath

May 11, 2009

Often, when you set your mind in the breath, the hardest thoughts to let go of are not the ones that are blatantly unskillful. It’s the relatively skillful ones. Because of the part of the mind that keeps telling you, “You’ve got to be responsible for this. You’ve got to look after that. You can’t let this go. You’re being irresponsible.” And those voices are very persuasive because they have good reasons, relatively good reasons. This is why you have to come back at them with better reasons. If your mind is going to function well, if you’re going to be able to handle your responsibilities without burning out, you need time to rest, time to put things down. There was a woman once who came to spend some time meditating at Watthamasathit. She was going to come and stay for two weeks. On the second day, she came to see John Phuong and said, “I’ve got to go home.” He asked her why. She said, “Well, I keep thinking about my husband and my children. They need me. What are they going to do for food? Who’s going to wash their clothing?” And John Phuong said to her, “Just tell yourself that you’ve died. If you’re dead, they would have to find some way of handling these problems. So now’s a good time for them to get some practice. They can handle these problems.” So one thing you can tell yourself is that the world doesn’t need you to hold it up or to collapse just by the fact that you were going to be quiet for an hour. That would be one thing. But it keeps on going. And so one thing you can tell yourself is that you’re not all that important to the outside world. What is important is the shape of your mind. That is something you have to live with. And, of course, it doesn’t hurt that once your mind is in better shape, you actually are able to handle issues in the world a lot better. So either way, if you are important, the world needs you to meditate. If you’re not that important, they’re not going to miss you. These are two arguments you can give yourself. One is what John Phuong used to call the deva-maras, the voices in the mind that tell you, “You’ve got this responsibility.” In other words, they tell you the good things you’ve got to worry about, the good things you’ve got to plan for tomorrow’s meal, the future of the orchard, whatever the issue is that you tend to carry around. If you’re not going to get all bent over, you’ve got to learn how to put these things down on a regular basis, carry these duties lightly. You do them, but you don’t give them any more thought than they really need. This is probably the most important skill in the meditation, realizing exactly how much what your outside responsibilities really require and how much is unnecessary, just spinning wheels. It’s the type of thinking you go through because you’re used to it, and it feels good because you’re feeling responsible. But it’s the type of thinking that’s not really all that necessary. The Buddha mentioned that the Buddha’s teaching on this point when he first got on the right track in his path was when he decided to divide his thoughts into two types. There was skillful thinking and unskillful thinking—harmless and harmful. Notice how he dealt with his thoughts. Instead of looking so much at the content, he says, if skillful thought was one that was based on lack of greed, lack of aversion, lack of delusion, renunciation, lack of ill will, lack of harmfulness. These thoughts would give good results. The harmful ones were the ones that were based on sensual passion. In other words, sensuality is used. What it means in the canon is that you’re passionate for your passions. We’re not so much attached to things outside or objects outside as we are to the mind’s loving to think about them, plan for them, and figure out how to gain that particular pleasure. Often there’s a lot more pleasure involved in thinking about a piece of chocolate cake than there is in the actual eating of the chocolate cake. That’s what the Buddha meant by sensuality. So thoughts imbued with sensuality, imbued with ill will, imbued with harmfulness—these he classed as unskillful. But the unskillful thoughts, he would keep them in check. The comparison he gave was like a cow herd. In South Asia, the cow herds have to watch out and make sure the cows don’t go into the rice fields and eat all the rice, trample the rice plants. So during the rainy season, when the rice plants are growing, you have to be very careful to make sure they don’t step in the rice fields. So you have to keep constantly after them, holding them in check, beating them back. That was the image he gave for unskillful thoughts, how you treat them. As for the skillful ones, he says, it’s like being a cow herd during the dry season. The rice has been harvested and the cows can pretty much go anywhere. You don’t have to worry about them trampling the fields or eating the rice because they have no plants in the fields and there’s no rice to be eaten. So that cow herd can just sit under a tree and say, “I have to just keep in mind that there are these cows out there. At some point, I’m going to have to bring them back in.” But he doesn’t have to be too careful about where they wander. That’s how the Buddha would treat his skillful thoughts, dividing skillful and unskillful in terms of what kind of mind state they come from and what kind of results they lead to. So that’s a useful lesson right there. Learn how to step out of your thought worlds and ask yourself, “Where does this thought come from? Where does it go?” Instead of just jumping into the world to see where it goes, go see how much fun you can have playing around in that thought world. You step back from it a bit and get some perspective on it. But I said, though, that even with skillful thoughts, the one drawback is that if you were to think skillful thoughts for a whole day and a night, it would get you tired, so the mind needs to rest. This is where he recommended resting and concentration, seeing that even skillful thoughts have their drawbacks. The mind can’t be carrying them around all the time. So, as he said, you seclude the mind from sensuality. You pull it away from your desire for sensual pleasures. You seclude it from unskillful mental qualities. And you focus it on one of the four frames of reference or the four establishings of mindfulness. Those, the canon says, are the proper topics of concentration or right concentration. It can be the body in and of itself, like the breath, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves. The easiest one, though, to focus on is the body in and of itself. You stay with the breath. Any thoughts of sensuality that come up, any desires for sensual pleasures, or any fascination with those desires, you have to learn to hold that in check. And for our purposes right now, any thought that pulls you away from the breath is going to be unskillful, even if it has to do with your responsibilities, even if it has to do with your requirements, your social duties, your duties for the monastery, your duties at home, your duties with the family, whatever. You put those aside and just stay with the body in and of itself. What this means is that you’re not concerned about the body in the world. The body in the world would be concerned with questions of how good-looking it is or how strong it is to do the work you need to do. How healthy it is. You put those issues aside. Just notice what the sensation of having a body is here, right here, right now. That is the Buddha point. And that can help cut away all those other issues. When you keep those other issues away, just have this sensation of the breath coming in, going out. As he says, you focus on how long it is or how short it is, and then you’re aware of the whole body as you breathe in and the whole body as you breathe out. That sense of full body awareness helps keep you planted firmly in the present moment. Because if your focus is too small, it’s very easy to slip off into the past, slip off into the future, or slip off into the future. There is what Ajahn Lee called delusion concentration, where the mind is still, but it’s got a very limited sense of where it is. You come out of delusion concentration and say, “Well, where was I? What was I focused on?” There’s not anything in the body, not anything you could really put your finger on. It’s pleasant, it’s nice, but it’s delusion concentration. To stay firmly planted in the present moment is good to do. To have full body awareness is like you nail your hands down in your hands, you nail your feet down in your feet. You can’t move. But it’s not that you’re nailed down in the sense that it’s going to be painful. It’s actually very pleasant. Let the breath come in, go out in any way that feels really good, feels really energizing. Then you can spread your awareness to fill the whole body, and there’s a sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Once it comes nibbling at the edge of your awareness, you don’t have to pay them any attention. Keep telling yourself, “This is important. You need this. This is strengthening to the mind.” Being able to find a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure and rapture, or pleasure and refreshment, just by being with the breath. You don’t have to buy it, you don’t have to ask for anything from anyone else. It’s a strength and energizing process that comes from within. It doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else. This is why the Buddha said that this pleasure is blameless. Whatever sense of ease and refreshment, pleasure, or rapture you feel, just allow that to be needed through the body. The energy channels in the body are just flowing through the energy channels in the body, so it saturates everything. You can think of it as getting into your bloodstream and going everywhere that blood vessels go in your body—through your head, down your shoulders, throughout the torso, through your legs, out to the tips of your toes, the tips of your fingers—everywhere. Think of it flowing around. Then just allow that awareness to stay in the state that you’re in. It’s a delicate balance. The Thai word for this is prakong, which means you hold it very gently but steadily. It’s the word they use when, say, a child is learning how to walk, and you hold the child. Or maybe with your hands an inch away from the child so the child can walk on its own, so you’re not grabbing it. If you grab it, the child’s not really going to learn how to walk properly. But if your hands are too far away, the child could easily fall and you wouldn’t be ready to catch it. So try to hold this sense of full body awareness here in the present moment. Don’t let it fall into the past. Don’t let it fall back into the future. Very gently make sure that it just stays right here. If any thought pops up and says, “Oh, I’ve got to think about this, I’ve got to think about that,” say, “No, not right now. The mind needs to be strengthened.” A common image in the forest tradition is of a knife that needs to be sharpened. Sharpening a knife takes a long time. These electric knife sharpeners that we use now have a big stone, and you run the knife over the stone. You have to be very careful that you apply steady pressure on the knife. Don’t add pressure, don’t let the pressure up, because then you’re going to spoil the blade. So it has to be very steady pressure as you work and work and work and work up and down the blade, along the knife, keeping it on the stone. Just be very steady for a long period of time. And then when you’re done, you have a sharp knife, a knife that can be used to cut through anything. If you keep using it without sharpening, like this, after a while it gets dull and you can’t cut through anything at all. So your mind needs to be sharpened. If you want to deal with issues in your life that need to be solved, you need a lot of thinking. Well, get the mind sharpened first, and then think about them. Another image that’s common in the canon is based on the word jhana. The verb jayati is also the verb that they use for a very steady flame. They have different words for burning in Pali. One of them is used specifically for a flame of an oil lamp, which burns very steadily. It’s so steady that you can read by it, unlike the flame of a fire in a fireplace that flickers around and is too unsteady to really read by properly. And John Lee’s image would be of a Coleman lantern, with a sense of ease and rapture filling the body, all the little blood vessels in your body, all the little nerves. He said it’s like the light that bathes the mantle in a Coleman lantern. Everything is very still, but every thread is glowing, energized. Again, it’s the kind of light that you can read by. So as you start with the breath, get a sense of pleasure coming from the breath. Then think of the breath energy suffusing the whole body. You don’t want to drop the breath. You want the breath to go for the pleasure. Stay with the idea that breath energy can fill all your nerves, can fill all your blood vessels. Now, the sense of ease and rapture, pleasure and refreshment, any pleasant sensation anywhere in the body, allow it to spread around the body. Think of it going with the blood, going with the nerves. So your sense of your body is like that mantle of the Coleman lantern. Everything is suffused with a sense of energy and well-being. Just maintain that. Think of that word, bhikkham. You’re holding it the way you would very gently hold a child learning to walk. Realize that you could slip and lose balance at any time, so you have to be there to watch over it. But you don’t want to grab hold of it too tight. And if part of the mind says, “How much longer are you going to do this?” You say, “As long as I need to. I’ve got a whole hour, and it’s not bad to be sitting here very still for a whole hour.” You’re not being irresponsible. You’re not being antisocial. You’re not being selfish. The mind is healed by this kind of awareness. And when it’s healed, it can do whatever work it eventually does have to do. With a lot more strength, a greater sense of well-being, you’re much more likely to do it skillfully. So take this chance to let the ragged edges of the mind get healed, get smoothed over. Any wounds in the mind, let them heal. Because this is a gift, not only to yourself, but to everybody around you.

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