Breath Training

August 20, 2010

When you meditate on the breath, you’re training the mind. It’s not just a matter of passively watching the breath coming in and going out. There’s a discourse where the Buddha is recommending to the monks that they practice mindfulness of breathing. And one of the monks says, “Oh, I already do that.” And the Buddha asks, “Well, how do you do that?” And the monk says, “Well, I put aside thoughts of the past, put aside thoughts of the future, and try to be a quantumist about the present as I breathe in, breathe out.” And the Buddha says, “There is that kind of breath meditation, but that doesn’t give the best results.” And so then he outlines sixteen steps altogether. And what’s important to notice about the sixteen steps is that you’re not just just getting sensitive to long-breathing and short-breathing—in other words, basically getting in touch with your breath. All the other steps are things that you train yourself to do. There’s an element of the will. There’s an element of skill that also has to be involved. For instance, being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. It’s something you will yourself to do. Then the Buddha asks, “Well, how do you do it skillfully?” You can work up to it, section by section. And John Lee recommends starting at the back of the neck, going down the back, out the legs, then from the throat down the front of the body, then from the diaphragm down out through the large intestines. Or you can start at the navel, work up the front, and go down the back. The important thing is that you do it systematically. And if you have a sense of the way you tend to hold the body and where you hold tension in the body, you might want to start at the points where the tension seems to be concentrated and think of releasing those. The fact that John Lee has you start with the back of the neck. It may have to do with the fact that he developed his method in response to a heart attack he’d had. He’d gone into the woods, walked three days into the jungle in northern Thailand. And soon after his arrival at the place where he was planning to spend the rains, he had a heart attack. It’s far away from any medicine, any doctors. If he was going to get out of there, he had to walk. So he spent the entire rains basically nursing himself back to health. And he did it working with the breath energy. Then I’ve talked to some people who’ve had heart attacks and they say that’s where you feel the tension is in the back of the neck. It gets into the shoulders. So this is where he would start to release that tension. And different people will find that they hold the tension in different spots. So wherever your spot is, often it’s wise to go there first if you can. Just think, “Relax, relax, relax,” and see how that relaxation spreads down to different parts of the body. This is useful not only as you’re sitting here meditating for the hour, but as you’re going through the day. You want to stop and check on your breath whenever you can. And your reflex reaction should be as soon as you focus on the breath. Relax the spots where you hold the tension. It gives you an immediate sense of ease and makes it more attractive to stay with the breath. Then the next step is learning how to maintain that full body awareness, because your awareness does have a tendency to shrink. So once you’ve been through the body a couple of times, and it is wise to go through it a couple of times, to pick up stillness. There are subtle patterns of tension you may have missed the first time around. Or you may find that if you relax the tension, say, in your neck, and as you go down and you’re concentrating on your feet, the tension in the neck comes back again. So the next question is, how do you focus on your feet at the same time that you relax the tension in the neck? I knew a woman in Thailand who had a very quick concentration. She said basically she thought of two spots in the body—the middle of her head, the base of the spine—and then she thought of connecting those. That was it. She was in concentration. Working with two spots at once seemed to rivet her attention. So you can give that a try. And then when you’ve got your two spots down, then you add a few more, and then you’re finally got the whole body and the ability to maintain an all-around attention. Because this is important. When you’re getting the mind to settle down like this, you want to have it in a good solid foundation. If you’re only focused on one spot, then as soon as you move from that spot, it’s a break in your concentration. But if the object of the concentration is the whole body, you can maintain that sense of the whole body. Thoughts can come in and go out, and they don’t destroy it. As you inhabit the whole body, you can pay attention to someone talking, you can respond. And you’ve still got the basic object of your concentration right there, and you’re still maintaining it through the activities. This is an important skill to develop. To make it easier to stay in the present moment, easier to stay with the breath, more nourishing for the body and more nourishing for the mind as well. The next step is to calm, as the texts say, “calm bodily fabrication,” i.e., calm the in-and-out breath. This is something you have to approach with care. There was another woman who was a student of Ajahn Phuong who had lost track of him. He had moved from Bangkok, where he’d stayed for a couple of years teaching. He moved out to Rayong, a little monastery way out in the middle of nowhere. And this one woman had lost track of him. She finally found him while I was first there. We were sitting one night meditating, and in the middle of meditation he said, “You’re sticking with a cool breath all the time. It’s going to sap your energy.” That’s all he said. In other words, you have to be careful about calming the breath. This may be one of the reasons why Ajahn Lee recommends that at the very beginning of the meditation you take a lot of good deep in-and-out breaths to make sure that all the body gets all the breath energy it needs, and then allow it to calm down to what seems to be the right level. If it gets too calm, you may find yourself drifting off. So make it a little heavier, just enough so you can keep track of it. Don’t lose your focus. Try to develop a sense of what’s just right. And this is going to require going beyond just right to just wrong, or beyond right or less than right. But as you adjust things back and forth, and try to adjust them gradually, and watch, and then gradually again, and then watch, and then gradually again, and watch, this way you get a greater sense of exactly where just right is. If there’s any sense of ease or fullness that comes with the breathing, think of it spreading around. In fact, that might be one of your exercises for yourself—how to breathe in a way that maintains a sense of fullness throughout the body. Sometimes as we force the breath in, we actually destroy that sense of fullness. Or when we squeeze it out, we destroy the sense of fullness. So think of every little cell in your body expanding with energy. And then as you breathe in, breathe out, allow that sense of fullness to stay in place. This provides you with a sense of balance, a sense of well-being, and the mind may start wandering off. It’s making sense how the mind can get bored quickly with something really nice. So you put it to work. You start turning around and looking at the mind itself to notice what kind of perception of the breath you have. Is this kind of perception helping or hindering the state of fullness? If you think of the breath as something that has to be pushed in and pushed out all the time, you’re not going to be able to get to the point where the breath actually stops, which is where you’re aiming. And stopping here doesn’t mean you just clamp down on it. But if you try to maintain that sense of fullness and balance until everything reaches a really perfect balance, then it will stay there. It helps to think of all the breath channels in the body connected with one another so that every part of the body feels nourished with breath energy, without you having to push it in and pull it out. So again, go through the body. Think of every channel connected. And if they’re not connected, think of them allowing them to flow into one another so that the breath channels that lead from the pores of your skin go all the way into the center of your body. And John Fung once recommended thinking of this line coming down the middle of the body, from the middle of the head down through the torso, and the breath actually coming in and out from that line. Not so much from the lungs or the nose. The line itself is the center of the breath energy. It radiates out, radiates in. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does. As the breath reaches stillness like this, there may still be some in and out, but it doesn’t create any pressure. Try to see if you can maintain that balance. And as you do, you begin to notice other things going on in the mind as well. You notice sometimes the mind is able to maintain the balance and sometimes it loses it. So you ask yourself, okay, exactly why is it losing it? Which direction is it going? Sometimes its energy is flagging. So what can you do to, as the Buddha said, gladden it, give it more energy? Sometimes it’s getting restless. What can you do to calm it down, make it more steady? Sometimes it feels burdened with trying to think of all these things all at once. So what can you do to cut away any unnecessary actions on its part? This is an important aspect of what the Buddha calls citta, or being really intent in what you’re doing. It’s noticing. That’s when you say you’re practicing a musical instrument. In what way are you doing it efficiently and in which way are you doing it inefficiently? I was reading yesterday about how they’ve decided to take those fast swimsuits out of the swimming competitions, get everybody back to the old-style swimsuit, and they were afraid that everybody would start losing their swim times. But what the swimming coaches were saying was that people had begun to notice, “Well, what was it about those swimsuits that made everybody faster? It wasn’t just the fact that they were slick, but they also held your core in a good position.” So they learned it by focusing on the core in this way. And this is not really new. There’s an old swimming manual that recommended it, but people just didn’t seem to be listening to it. Finally, they had noticed that if you hold your core perfectly straight, you can keep your core in a good position. You can settle in there and maintain your balance there. And if things aren’t working, stop and watch. Again, watch all around. This is something with the breath, this is something with the mind. There’s no great hurry to come to an answer. Just be very careful and patient and watchful. And you’ll catch something. You’ll catch yourself doing something you didn’t notice before. This is intentness. So you’re learning to use your powers of observation. Through instructions you’d say more than anything else, “Be observant and use your ingenuity.” When you finally notice yourself doing something unskillful, ask yourself, “Is there another way?” And if you can’t think of anything right offhand, just stay still and watch. It’s like cooking scrambled eggs. If you’re in a hurry to get them done, you end up with rubber. The eggs are tough. They don’t taste nearly as good as scrambled eggs over very low heat. Now, the thing about very low heat is you’ll stir and stir and stir for a long time and nothing seems to happen. But it is happening. It’s just that you’re not noticing it yet. And then finally you begin to get a sense that the eggs are beginning to coagulate a little bit. So even though you’re very still and watchful and nothing seems to be happening, that doesn’t mean nothing is happening. It’s more a case of learning to watch all around, learning to watch with more sensitivity. And something will have to show up, because everything that’s happening is happening right here. It’s just a question of whether you’re watching properly. There’s a lot to be learned by watching the breath and regarding it as a training. It’s not just a mechanical exercise you have to get through on your way to greater insights. It’s the insights you gain into how you breathe, how you relate to the breath, the way you’re thinking about the breath, the way you’re observing the breath. Those are the insights that are going to develop your discernment. If you really want to go deeply into the mind, you first have to get sensitive enough so you can just observe something like the breath, because the mind is a lot more subtle than the breath is. If you can’t really observe the breath or how the mind relates to it, you’re not going to be able to observe the deeper things that really lead to release. It’s in the doing of the path that the realization of the end of suffering arises. It’s not that you do the path, and then somehow the end of suffering comes as a reward. You don’t sit here with one eye on the path and then looking down the road to see, “Well, when is the end of suffering going to come?” You have to pay full attention to the path, and in doing so, that’s where the end of suffering is going to appear.

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