Preconceived Notions of the Breath

October 29, 2010

When the Buddha talks about the wind element in the body, he lists several aspects, one of which is the in-and-out breath. Another is the wind sensations that go throughout the entire body. When you’re focusing on the breath, it’s important to think about both sides. The in-and-out breath is easy to see, but for really settling down in the present moment, you’ve got to work with the breath energy that goes throughout the body. After all, we’re working on an awareness here that’s supposed to fill the entire body. The third step for breath meditation is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. For good, strong concentration, the Buddha says, once you’ve developed a sense of focus and a sense of ease and refreshment arises, work that through the entire body so it fills the entire body, permeates, pervades, suffuses the whole body, and all of this is connected. I don’t know how many times I’ve said this, but I’ve had people ask, “Is it okay if instead of focusing on the breath, I just focus on a sensation in the body?” And the answer is, well, that’s part of the breath, those sensations in the body. If you didn’t have the breath energy going throughout the body, you wouldn’t be aware of it. There wouldn’t be any sensations there. The breath, in this sense, is the energy field of the whole body. You might think of it as a magnetic field, or a field of sensations. And each of those sensations has its four dimensions. There’s the breath dimension, there’s the solidity dimension, there’s the liquidity dimension, and there’s the fire dimension. Think of them that way. And you can focus on any of those dimensions. The breath is the most immediate of the four, although we tend to jump over it and go straight to the solid. If you ask people about their body, they talk about the solid body or about the liquids in the body, but it’s basically the more solid parts. But the fact that you can sense this body depends on your being aware of the breath or having the breath as a means. So when you’re focusing on the breath energy in the body, you’re actually trying to get down to your most basic sense of having a body here and learning how to sensitize yourself to it. Because this is the other problem. We’ve been taught to desensitize ourselves to this, and actually focus on other aspects of our experience. So you might want to go through the body and think about relaxing all the different joints. Which are the parts of the body where the circulation seems to be most cut off? Because the circulation is related to the breath energy flowing. And when the circulation is cut off, it’s usually a sign that the breath energy is cut off. So where is the circulation weakest? You might want to go through your fingers, go through your toes, the backs of the hands, the tops of the feet. And which parts of your arms is the circulation cut off? Which parts of your legs? Go through the torso, go around the head, around the eyes, in the ears, just everywhere. Search around to make sure everything seems opened up and flowing. And that should help to sensitize you to the sense of energy in the body. And then do what you can to breathe in a way that allows those channels to stay open. One channel that tends to be closed off pretty quickly is the channel around the heart area. So try to focus on that. Think of it being open, open, open. Then you may find that it has an effect on your posture. Okay, allow it to have that effect. Things start getting sorted out. As the different channels open up, you may find a tingling in some part of the body, or itchy sensations that go around the body. That happens when the circulation opens up, when the breath energy is allowed to flow. And even though certain parts of the body may feel really solid, remember, each of those solid sensations has a breath aspect, which means the flow of the breath can go through there too. In Chan Phuong, we talk about the breath and the bones. So think of that as a possibility too. What we’re doing here is opening ourselves up to possibilities. It’s not so much that we’re imposing a foreign way of perception on the body. It’s that we’re learning how to perceive the sensations in the body in a way that’s actually helpful to the concentration. Just like when you’re talking biology, you’ll talk about one level of reality, then when you move to physics you’re talking about another level. And it’s not that the biology is right and the physics is wrong, or vice versa. You’re talking about these levels for different reasons, for different purposes. And it’s the same with the breath energy in the body. It’s a very useful concept, a very useful perception, for allowing you to inhabit the body with a sense of ease. Because when the breath flows smoothly, it’s a lot easier to stay with the body. And it’s a lot easier to coexist with pains in the body as well. Because a lot of the sense of being oppressed by a pain has very little to do with the actual pain and a lot to do with the way we freeze up the breath energy around it and try to solidify things as if we’re going to cut off any possibility of the pain. So the breath gets cut off and that suddenly becomes an uncomfortable part of this field of our awareness. So if there are pains, say, in the hip or in the back, think of the breath flowing around them, flowing through them. If it helps to think of the energy of the circulation of the blood, think in those ways. Remember, the blood is basically energy. And liquid cannot go through a lot of solid membranes. It can go through some, but not all of them, whereas the breath can go through anything. So don’t limit yourself just to the idea of where the blood can flow, because the breath can go everywhere. And as you get more sensitive to it, you realize there’s also a breath energy cocoon around the body. And that, too, helps to understand that the body has its knots and it has its gaps. So think of healing those as well. This way you provide yourself with a better place to settle down. And your concept of breath and your concept of body can be adjusted so that it makes it easier to be fully aware of the body. So to inhabit the body with a sense of ease and well-being. So whatever way you have of getting in touch with a sense of energy, it might mean going through a very systematic way of loosening up your joints, loosening up the muscles you tend to tighten, holding a concept of breath channels, going through areas where you never thought they could. I remember my first treatment with an osteopath. He was going down my spine, and he was finding knots of tension in there, which I’d always assumed were bone, which were going to have to stay solid. And he pushed on them a little bit, and I realized, well, that was actually muscle that I’d been tensing up, in the sense of energy flow. It came way in and relaxed that muscle. It had an impact throughout the body. So allow for these possibilities. This is one of the important lessons in meditation. There are lots of possibilities that we close our minds to. And when we close our minds to them, they do become impossibilities. It’s when you open your mind that they become possible again. And it’s a good lesson in learning about our cultural limitations. Part of the hubris of the West is that we have a culture that can see the limitations in other cultures, but for some reason is not itself limited. But that’s not the case. We have our limitations, too. And sometimes they’re a lot worse than the limitations in other cultures. And particularly with regard to meditation, the way you relate to your body has been influenced by what you’ve been taught about what the body does, how it’s made, what it’s made of, what you can and cannot perceive. So learn to put some question marks beside those preconceived notions and try out a few other ones. Because as long as we’re dealing with notions and concepts, we might as well deal with ones that are actually helpful to getting the mind concentrated, to put us in a position where we can actually see the relationship between physical processes and mental processes, and bring the mind to a state where it really can settle down and indulge in its concentration, feed off the concentration so that it’s strengthened and can start looking at those processes in more detail so that you can understand them and gain release.

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