Adjusting the Breath

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One of the basic principles of focusing on the breath is learning how to let the breath be comfortable. The question is, how do you do that? Sometimes it seems when you’re focusing on the breath that the body gets more and more tense, more and more recalcitrant, and it takes more and more effort to breathe. In a case like that, you might want to say, “Well, we’re not going to do any breathing at all. If the body’s going to breathe, let it breathe on its own. You don’t have to do any of the breathing.” That’s one approach. In other words, what you’re doing is messing up with the process so much, you’ve got to step back and just let the body do its own thing. If it needs to breathe, it’ll breathe. You simply have one do. The second approach is to watch, to be as little involved as possible. That’s for extreme cases. When it’s not so extreme, you can approach it in different ways, basically having to do with the coarse breath, i.e., the in-and-out breath, and then the breath energy that you can feel throughout the nerves, the blood vessels, out to the pores. You can focus on either one. If you’re focusing on the in-and-out breath, you might want to notice which parts of the body are doing most of the breathing. Do they feel tired? Would they like a rest? Then just tell yourself, “Okay, let other parts of the body take over, the parts that have been doing most of the breathing.” Say it’s the shoulders or the diaphragm, or even if there’s any tension that seems to build up in the head. Because sometimes we have our cartoon ideas about the breath that say, “Well, when the breath comes in, you have to have a sensation there in the nose.” And so you actually create the sensation. Just let that go. Tell the parts of the body that have been doing the work that they can have a rest right now, and other parts will come in and take over. And often you’ll find that the ones that have to come in and take over are the ones who’ve really been starved of breath energy. So this is good for them. They get some exercise. They get to have some renewed breath energy. And then you may want to check, are there other parts of the body that seem to be lacking in energy? And think of breathing in a way that fills them up with energy. That may require deeper breathing or longer breathing. See what they need and then provide it. Sometimes you’ll find that your instincts are right. As soon as you notice that a particular part that you’ve been overlooking is lacking in breath energy, you’ll know instinctively how to breathe into that part. Other times you have to use your imagination. Because whatever preconceived notions you may have are actually getting in the way of that part’s participating. So you might think of the breath energy coming in right there at that part of the body, filling up any empty parts that need to be energized by the breath, or exercised by the breath, or whatever kind of breath they need. Those are some ways of approaching the issue from the angle of the in-and-out breath. And then there’s the other angle. You start actually with the more subtle sensation of simply having the body sitting here and telling yourself whatever you feel of the body right now, the fact that there are arms and legs and there’s a torso and a head and all the connecting parts, that’s breath. It’s an energy field. How does that energy field feel? Are you fully aware of it? Are there parts that have been neglected? In cases like this, you don’t really have to think about how long or deep or whatever the breath is. Just think of allowing the whole body to be fully present. Then the breath will find its own length. Allow your awareness to fill every little part of the body. This is one of the meanings of sampajjana, alertness. It’s that knowing of the present moment as fully as possible. One of the translations in Thai for sampajjana is “knowing your body” or “knowing yourself” all around, all at once, all together. It’s kind of 360-degree knowing, although 360 degrees is just a two-dimensional image. It’s all three-dimensional, the whole thing. Try to be equally aware of every part of the body. Don’t leave anything out. This is one of the reasons why we do a body scan. At the beginning of the meditation, because when you go through the body systematically, you may run across parts that you hadn’t been thinking about much or hadn’t been aware of much. So you want to give them a place at the table. You want them to come in and share with the breath. So the purpose of all this is to give the mind a good place to settle down, a sense of well-being inside. It doesn’t cost any money. It’s simply a matter of skill. And still, skill requires that you pay attention and that you learn from your mistakes. And you keep coming back and doing it again and again. This is one of the principles of mastery. A reporter was talking about one time he went to see a football team going through preseason practice. After the coach had called a day, almost everybody went back to the locker rooms, except for two guys who were out there throwing passes and catching passes. And they were doing one particular maneuver again and again and again. And the reporter thought, “Well, this must be a new rookie who’s a little bit more ambitious than the rest.” So he went down to look carefully to see who it was, and it turned out it was the standard quarterback. He’s probably already tossed lots and lots of passes. But he wanted to keep his hand in, wanted to see if there was anything more that he could perfect in his skill. And that was why he was the star. So you keep doing these same things over and over again, and you begin to notice there are little details you may have missed. It’s like walking over a path, back and forth, back and forth. If you do it enough times, you begin to know every little blade of grass, every little leaf, every little plant. Every little flower on either side of the path. If you just take one sweep through the path, you might be able to say, “Well, I saw this and that,” but you don’t really know it until you’ve been back and forth, back and forth, over and over again. And so we keep coming back to the breath. The breath is the present of the body, just like alertness is the present of the mind. You want to keep in touch with these things. You want to notice as much as you can. Because if insight is going to arise, it’s going to have to arise here. After all, the Buddha says, “You touch the deathless.” He sometimes even says, “You see the deathless with the body.” This is right where you’re sensing the body right now. That’s where the deathless is going to be encountered. So you really want to get to know this spot well, and being willing to come back to the breath. The breath, again and again and again, fosters your sensitivity. And you’ll find that the breath has lots of different ins and outs. We say the breath comes in and the breath goes out, but the breath does all kinds of things. Once a friend of a John Lee’s came to see him and said, “Why do you keep telling people to focus on the breath? All there is is just in and out. That’s it.” And John Lee said, “Well, if that’s all you see in it, that’s all you get from it. But if you look carefully, you see there’s more.” And it’s so often the case with this boundary line between the body and the mind. You’ll find that different techniques work at different times. Different ways of conceiving the breath energy will work at different times. And the attitude should be that you’re always willing to learn. Just like the quarterback and the pass receiver, you go out and just throw a few more, catch a few more. It gives you more and more chance to observe what’s actually going on. There’s a woman I know who went to Japan. As part of her project in Japan, she wanted to study with one of their living national treasures, a guy who did pottery. And so he accepted her as a student. She’d go in and she’d throw her pots and put them in the kiln. The next day she’d come back and she’d find that a good majority of them had been ruined in the kiln. Whereas the master’s pots always seemed to come out perfect, perfect, perfect every day. And she found it really discouraging. Until one day, when they’d just opened up the kiln and the master had gone in and found out a lot of his pots had been ruined. Then she noticed something really important. Instead of getting upset, he went into the kiln and he sat there and he looked and looked and looked, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. And that’s just clay in a kiln. So you can imagine what the energy in the body and all the different disorders that you may have in the body and all the different ways the mind may be relating to the body at any particular time. There are lots of different ways that you can work with the breath. Lots of different approaches you’re going to have to try. So it may seem like one problem, but actually this is the key to solving many problems. So you want to keep coming back, coming back, coming back. And as you get really interested in this issue of how can we make the breath energy in the body feel good, how can we make the in-and-out breath feel good, so it feels nourishing and it fills the whole body? It’s this ability to fill the whole body with the breath, including the head. Because sometimes we tend to reside in the head, and the head gets cut off from the breathing process. Make sure the head gets involved, too. Because only then can you have a real sense of being at one with the breath, which takes the mind into deeper and deeper levels of concentration, to arise. That’s where you don’t have to keep evaluating and testing things. Things feel just right. As Ajahn Fuen once said, it’s like putting water into a big water jar. You put it in, put it in, put it in. There comes a point where you can’t put any more in because the jar is full. In the same way, you adjust the breath until it’s just right, and then you can’t make it just righter, because that’s it. That’s as far as it’s going to go. You just maintain that. That’s when you can get a real sense of being at one with the breath. That sense of oneness can take you very deeply into concentration. So this is a skill you want to keep returning to. Because it has lots to teach you, if you’re willing to learn. Just learning how to get that breath really comfortable, the breath energy in the body really comfortable. Because you learn a lot about not only the breath, but also the mind.

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