The Skill of the Breath

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What does your body feel like as you breathe? Where do you notice a sensation to tell you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out”? We tend to think of the breath simply as the air coming in and out through the nose. But the word “breath” can also cover the energy flow. And that can be anywhere in the body at all. It flows in the nerves, it flows in the blood vessels. If it didn’t flow, we’d be paralyzed. We’d have no feeling in certain parts of the body. So the fact that you sense your body here, what they call proprioception, you’re sensing the sense of the body as you feel it from within. That’s all breath, or primarily breath. And it’s good to explore that for several reasons. One, if you’re sitting or meditating, sometimes the rhythm of the breathing is like being at a cradle on the rocks, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You go to sleep. Or many of us associate calm breathing with a state of mind just before we drop off to sleep. So as soon as we focus on the breath, there we go. The other problem is, we’re sitting and meditating and the mind doesn’t settle down at all. It refuses to stay with the breath. Those are the two big whirlpools we have to watch out for. One pulls us off into sleepiness, the other pulls us off into distraction. One way to avoid that is to try to get interested in this idea of the breath as energy flowing in the body. How do you sense it? Where do you sense it? Remember when I first went to Thailand and was learning breath meditation, it seemed so frustrating. Everybody else seemed to have a very intuitive sense of the breath in the body. It was a very normal idea for them. For me, it was very strange and foreign. The idea may be foreign, but the actual experience is not. It’s just learning how to label it as, “Oh, this is the breath that they’re talking about. This is the energy flow they’re talking about.” One way to get sensitive to it is to go through the body, section by section. Start out with the tips of your fingers. Think of the bones, the tips of the fingers. Then work your way up through the palms of the hands, through the wrists, the forearms. Ask yourself, “Is there any tension that you feel?” If you’re not sure if you feel tension, compare your right side to your left side. Which side seems to be holding more tension? In the palms, say? In the wrists? Do you sense any tension at all? Allow it to relax. Keep it relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then move up to the forearms, the upper arms, the shoulders. Then start with the toes and work up through the feet, the legs. Then through the hips, up the back. Don’t take on too much at any one time. Little bits, little increments, working up bit by bit by bit through the body. And although the relaxation may tempt you to get sleepy, remember, keep on asking that question, “Which side has more tension? Where is there tension here?” And then see how you can relax it. And notice when there’s a tendency, say, to tense up again with the next in-breath, or to squeeze it out with the next out-breath. Work your way up through the spine, through the neck, and through the head. Notice where you feel the blood going through the face, around your eyes, in the neck, and around the jaws. The blood nourishing your teeth and the gums. Try to sensitize yourself to this. It’s something that’s immediately present, but we tend to overlook it. And it’s good to give it some space like this, and to be curious, inquisitive. That’s what keeps us awake. And go through the body a couple times to check and make sure that anything that’s in the area that you cleaned up and relaxed doesn’t tense up again. Then you can try settling down in one spot and spreading your awareness from that spot to fill the whole body. Then try to maintain that whole body awareness and be very sensitive to see when it’s going to shrink. For most people, it tends to shrink on the out-breath. So be especially careful on the out-breath. Even though you’re breathing out, you’re not trying to iron out all the breath energy in the body. If you did, you’d die. Just allow the excess to go out. Keep your awareness broad, broad, broad, all the way in, all the way out. This gives you something to do. This gives you work to do. So you don’t just lose touch, lose focus, and drift away. And it gives you a good foundation as you get more sensitive to this area of your awareness. It’s good to carry this sensitivity into the world. Here, though, it’s important to have a sense that you have a protection around the body because you don’t want to absorb other people’s energy. That’s one of the first things you’re going to notice as you get sensitive to this kind of energy, that other people have energy fields that impinge on yours. So you want to keep this energy field full, full of your awareness. You occupy the whole space so that no one else comes in. And then you have a source of strength, of well-being, as you go through the day. So as you’re dealing with difficult people, with difficult situations, you have a source of nourishment so you’re not wasted away. Don’t get exhausted. And you can start watching your own thoughts as well. Because most of us live in our thoughts. It’s good to get out of our thought worlds. One way to get out of the thinking or the exclusively thinking side of the mind is to get in touch with this more physical side. And you will begin to notice that when certain thoughts come through the mind, you tense up in different parts of the body. If you can see that connection, then try to relax those parts and see what happens. This is one of the reasons why people who think a lot in their work tend to be more tired at the end of the day than people who are doing physical labor. With physical labor, you go home and you sleep, and that’s it. Rest of the body. But when you’re thinking in the course of the day, you tend to keep that thinking with you and carry it around. And you’re carrying it around in your body, too, all these different patterns of tension that never get released. So it’s good to release them as often as you can, especially when you notice a thought is unskillful, it’s causing you unnecessary stress, it’s creating unnecessary problems for the people around you. Learn how to breathe through whatever pattern of tension is maintaining that thought. And it frees things up, allows the thought just to go away, which means that it’s not as bad as you’re meditating it. You’re not the only person who’s benefiting. The other people around you are benefiting as well because they’re not going to be so subject to your greed, your aversion, your delusion, your irritation. When you have a greater sense of strength inside, you don’t have to lean on other people so much. You don’t have to feed off them so much. You’ve got your own internal source of food. This is a question we often get here. What do the monks do for other people? Well, for one thing, we train our minds so that we’re not inflicting our greed, aversion, and delusion on the people around us. And the more we understand the roots of our unskillful behavior, the more clarity we bring to our relationships with other people. And the better we can explain where their problems are as well, their attachments, their ignorance, their delusion. This is an important skill. It’s a very rare one in our modern world. Our society doesn’t value it very much, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not important. You can’t take the values of society as your guide. You have to understand that the value of developing the mind really is an important skill. It’s important that it’s been passed on, and it’s important that we practice it as a way of passing it on to the people around us and the people who come after us. If everybody could understand this skill, the world would be a much better place. I was just talking about a social psychologist who was saying that all these expressions of glee and celebration over an assassination are a healthy sign of unity in the society. Societies need moments of unity like this in order to have a sense of cohesion, as if it didn’t matter what we’re expressing our cohesion around. But it really is important what we’re expressing and what we find as a unifying principle. Think about the events in Thailand recently at Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s funeral. A million people showed up because they appreciated the value of someone who could train his mind and be a good example to others. That’s healthy cohesion. This is why when you’re practicing, sometimes you find yourself at odds with the society around you. People constantly want to pull you into their ideas of what’s important, pull you into their energy field. And it’s really important that you learn how to maintain your own independent energy field so you don’t get sucked into the weirdness around you, so that you have a clearer and clearer sense from within of what’s right and what’s wrong. Society needs people like this. So as you develop this skill, you’re not the only one who benefits. You’re taking something really good that’s been passed down or is still surviving from the past. You’re taking advantage of it and you’re passing it on. It’s a good tradition. And it’s good to keep it alive. you

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