Levels of the Breath

July 31, 2011

Start with thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people close to your heart, and then goodwill spreading out in all directions to cover all beings. May we all understand the causes for true happiness, and may we all act in accordance on them. Whether all beings will act in line with the causes for true happiness, that’s really in their power. What’s in your power is to try to maintain this motivation that you don’t want to harm anyone, that you’re always wishing for happiness that’s harmless to yourself and the people around you. That’s something you can bring under your control. That’s a motivation you can maintain. You want to keep that as the motivation for your practice because that helps give you the strength to do the easy things, to do the hard things that are required in the practice. And as you focus on that motivation, it reminds you of the importance of the mind. The mind is what needs to be trained, because its intentions make all the difference. That’s why we focus on the breath, because the breath is very close to the mind. If there’s a movement in the mind, it usually reverberates into the breath. And often it’s easier to see it in the breath first, before we catch sight of it in the mind. So take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. And notice where you feel the breathing. The obvious breathing, of course, is the in-and-out breath that brings the air into the lungs and then allows it to go out. Notice how that feels. If you take long breathing, does it feel tense at some point in the breath? There are two ways you can respond to that if it does. One is to shorten the breath, and the other is to see if you can keep the long breathing but try to relax around it all the way through the breath. And when you breathe out, try not to squeeze things out, but allow the breath to go out in a way that’s very relaxing all the way out. If you can’t maintain that sense of relaxation around the long breath, then you can shorten it. Make either the in-breath short or the out-breath shorter. Deeper, more shallow. Heavier, lighter. Faster, slower. These are things you can work with. And as you get sensitive to the in-and-out breath, you begin to realize there are other levels of breathing in the body as well. Two in particular. One is the sense of energy that flows through the body as you breathe in and flows through the body as you breathe out. And that has many levels in and of itself. There’s one level that feels like it’s working its way down to your fingers and down to your toes as you breathe in. When the in-breath is finished, this energy has gotten all the way down to the fingers and toes, and then it goes out. Then you may want to notice which parts of the body tend to be tensed up that don’t allow that energy to flow. There may be tension in the chest or the shoulders, around the wrists, in the hands. That’s going down the shoulders and arms. Then down the back and the legs. Notice if there’s any tension on either side of the spine. If you notice it, try to relax it. See if you can relax the tensions on either side of the spine so you don’t lose your balance. When I was teaching in France a couple months back, there was one man who was relaxing his back and he found that he was tipping over to the right. He was noticing the tension in the left side of the back, but he wasn’t compensating by releasing the tension on the right. So the tension on the right pulled him down. So if you release something on the left side, notice where on the right side a corresponding release needs to be. Keep things in alignment. Go down the spine, go down through the hips. Notice where in the legs there may be some tension. Down through the ankles, out through the toes. Wherever you notice any tension, you can allow it to relax. Sometimes it’s good to compensate. Compare your left side with your right side. Because if you’re used to carrying tension around, sometimes you don’t even notice it. But if you can begin to notice that one side is carrying more tension than the other, then you’ve got something to notice, something to compare. So wherever you feel there’s excess tension, allow that to relax. Try to keep it relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. That helps with the energy that goes through the body in waves. There’s another level of energy that goes very fast. As soon as you start breathing in, it’s already gone down all the way to the toes, all the way down to the fingers. Now to sense that, your mind has to be very still. And it helps to develop a large, whole-body awareness. This, of course, relates to the fact that just as your breath has many different levels, the awareness of the mind has different levels as well. There’s kind of a background awareness. All your nerve centers are sending you information about the whole body. And then there’s a more conscious awareness, where you make up your mind intentionally to focus on one thing or another. Highlight one part of the body and block out other parts of the body. What we’re doing as we’re meditating is to bring those two types of awareness together. So the background awareness is there. It’s not blotted out. And you focus not willy-nilly. You’ve made up your mind. You’re going to focus on one spot of the body. And if you’re going to move from that spot to another spot, do it deliberately until you find a spot that’s not blotted out. That seems to be really good. One that’s connected with the different energy channels in the body. Down at the tip of the breastbone is a good spot. The base of the throat, all the spots that Ajahn Lee mentions in his breath instructions, are like crossroads in the breath energies. You stay focused there and you’re covering lots of different breath channels. Then when you find a spot that you really like, allow your awareness to settle there. And then think of it connecting with the background awareness that’s already filling your body. And see if you can maintain that connection. See how long you can maintain that connection. As for the levels of breath, it’s usually best to focus on the breath energy that flows through the bloodstream. Because from there you can switch back to the more obvious in-and-out breath if you need to, or to an even stiller breath inside. There are spots in the body where there’s just a very still breath energy that doesn’t move at all. The spot where the diaphragm meets the ribcage is one of those. There are spots in the middle of the head. Each person has his or her own different spots. So you may want to make a survey to see where your spots are. This requires, of course, that your awareness be very still. Otherwise, if your awareness is not still, you don’t know where the stillness of the breath is. Because everything seems to move when your awareness is moving. It’s like being in a train. You look out the window. Not only do people and cars move, but also trees move, mountains move, houses move. Because you’re moving all the time. It’s only when you stop and get off the railroad train and stand still that you realize, okay, people and cars are moving, and trees may move in the breeze, but their bases are fixed, and the houses don’t move, and the mountains don’t move. So when the mind begins to settle down, try to be really still, and then focus in on that still breath energy, the one that’s not cramped or squeezed or in any way obstructed by the in-and-out breathing at all. And see if you can think of that stillness then suffusing through the body as well. Notice which aspect of the body is still. It’s like tuning into a radio station. Right at the moment there are lots of different radio waves going through the air, some from Los Angeles, some from San Diego, some from Tijuana. It’s up to you to dial your radio to see which station you want to focus in on. So as you’re meditating, you’re either focusing on the blatant movements of the breath, the more subtle movements of the breath, or the still breath. They all occupy the same area. They’re just different aspects of this same area. This way you get to notice all the different aspects of your inner territory. And exploring this inner territory is one of the things that allows you to stay here for a long time, because there are very interesting things to find going through all the tunnels, going through all the different channels. It’s like going underground in a city, where the subway trains are, where the river channels are, diverted through pipes. There’s lots to explore. The whole world’s in here. So try to make yourself sensitive to this part of your awareness. We spend most of our lives desensitizing ourselves to it because we have to focus on other things—what people are saying, what jobs we have to do. It’s good to put those things aside and allow this dimension of your awareness some space so you can begin to explore it, because this is where your awareness really lives. And if it’s living in cramped quarters, it’s going to be really uncomfortable. So you give it some space and begin to explore where it’s so powerful. Because as you go down these breath channels, you find that there are areas of energy that you’ve blocked off. And because they’re blocked off, you can’t get any good use out of them. So allow things to open up a bit inside, so that you discover more resources that you can tap into. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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