Thinking with the Breath (med-fi)

June 13, 2012

Try to develop your sensitivity to how the breathing feels. What kind of breathing feels good and what kind of breathing doesn’t feel so good? You can pose the question in your mind, “What breath would the body like right now?” You can move your awareness around the body to see what different parts seem to want. You can ask your stomach, “What kind of breathing would your stomach like right now?” How about the chest? How about the back, the shoulders, the arms, the hands, the legs? Think of the breath nourishing them and seeing what kind of breathing would nourish them. If that doesn’t work, consciously change the way you breathe. Breathe long for a while. Then breathe shorter for a while, deeper, more shallow. So you can see what kind of impact the different ways you breathe has on the mind, has on the body. One of the reasons we do this is because it really is healing for the body and it’s healing for the mind. The breath energy in the body tends to get frazzled. As you go through the day, especially if you’re subject to other people’s energies, or if you take their energies in, you’re going to find that your level of energy gets distorted, gets all cut up, chopped up. So you’re trying to blend everything together again, reconnect everything, because it’s when the breath energy in the body is all connected that it’s really healthy. Then your inner energy level gets higher. In fact, when things are really well connected, you don’t even have to breathe in and out. You can just sit here very, very, very still. With all the breath channels open, they nourish one another. But even before you get to that point, you find that connecting things in the body and giving all the different parts of the body you can think of good breath energy, it really is healing. Try to get interested in this, because there’s a lot to learn from the way you play with the breath. You talk about people developing physical skills. They learn to think about the object they work on and actually think with the object they work on. They get fascinated by all the various changes that they can make. There was a sociologist who was sitting in on a lecture, and the lecture hall was so full that they had to put a number of the people into an adjacent room and then bring the sound into that other room. Apparently, the other room was a medical classroom, and there was a photograph of a surgeon working on how to open somebody’s abdomen. He had picked up a large section of their large intestine. He said there were a number of people in the room, some journalists, and they would glance nervously at this picture of the large intestine after a while and get grossed out and look away. But all the doctors and nurses in the room said they were fascinated by it because the surgeon in the picture was doing something unusual with the large intestine. In other words, they had the background of dealing with large intestines to know what was unusual and what would not be unusual. So they weren’t grossed out; they were intrigued. Intuitions we can change in life should have us intrigued, because that’s where the possibility of making really good changes is. So learn to get intrigued with the breath. It can raise your energy level when it’s low. It can calm things down when you’re tense. It can give you a fortress against other people’s energies and your own emotions. And step back. We often think about people getting disconnected from their emotions or denying their emotions, but those are not the same thing. Stepping back from emotions doesn’t mean that you deny them or that you disown them. It means that you look at them for what they are, so you can figure out what kind of change is here. When you learn how to work with your own emotions in this way, it’s a lot easier to deal with other people’s emotions. You may not be able to change their emotions. But at least you can learn how to step back and see, “Oh, this is what that person is operating from. This is how I usually get hooked into that person’s emotion.” But you realize you don’t have to do that. The first place to gain this lesson is working with your own. We tend to internalize other people’s emotions, and then they become ours. The first line of defense is to recognize the distinction—what’s theirs, what’s ours—and then learn how to work with what’s ours. Because otherwise, their emotions will still be able to seep in, and then we’re stuck. You can step back from your greed, step back from your anger, your anxiety, whatever, and see it as a manifestation in the body and in the mind. And realize that with the breath you have a way to work with it. You can breathe through and reconnect the parts. You seem to have been torn apart by that emotion. At the very least, you’ve got a place where you can look at it. The Buddha talks about having your meditation well in hand. And you can apply this to any thought, any emotion, any feeling in the body. The image he gives is of a person sitting looking at someone lying down, or a person standing looking at someone sitting. In other words, you step back a bit, you’re above things a bit, so you can see what’s happening. Ideally, you want to get some experience with this just in working with the breath itself. You can step back from it a bit and ask, “What kind of breathing would be good now? Who wants some deep breathing? Who wants some shallow breathing? Who wants some gentle breathing? Who wants some strong breathing?” And learn to sensitize yourself to what the different parts of the body have to say. Because if you identify with one part of the body all the time, the other parts are going to get left out. So it’s important that you learn how to spread the range of your awareness and move around the body. It’s not all that important where you start, but it is important that you have a systematic plan so that you end up covering the whole body. And gain a sensitivity to what this energy is like, and gain a sensitivity to when it’s connected, because it’s the connectedness of the energy that creates the kind of force field around you where other people’s energies can’t come in. This is one of the reasons why we work so much on this area of our awareness. We practice again and again and again to get really familiar with this. Because it has so much to offer. When the energy in the body is tightly knit and well-connected, you do feel that it’s impervious. The image the Buddha gives is of throwing a ball of string against a hardwood door. The string doesn’t penetrate the door at all. In some way, other people’s energies can come, but they don’t have an impact. They don’t penetrate. And when they don’t penetrate, you don’t feel that you’re a victim. When you’re not feeling that you’re a victim, you’re not in the line of fire. You can step back and watch what that person is doing and be in a much better position to figure out, “Well, what can I say? What can I do to at least deflect the negativity coming from that person?” And if you have to negotiate with a person, the fact that you’re not feeling threatened by that person puts you in a much better position. There’s a lot to be gained from the breath. Working with the breath, getting intrigued with the breath, seeing its potentials keeps you engaged in the present. And as Ajaan Lee says, it acts as a mirror for the mind. You begin to see a lot about the mind as well as you’re working with the breath energies in the body. So let yourself get intrigued. Pose questions. Ask about possibilities. And see what can be done. Working with the breath, in other words, when you see how you relate to the breath, it gives you lessons that can be applied in other areas as well. For instance, if you’re working with the breath in a way that leads to a sense of well-being, you’re showing goodwill for it. If you see areas where it’s not going well and you want to help, that’s compassion. Where it is going well, you want to maintain it, protect it. That’s empathetic joy. And if you see areas where you can’t make a difference right now, just leave them be. That’s equanimity. You get lessons in these social versions from how you deal with the breath. You gain a sense of what you can change and what you can’t change. That’s what it means to think with something or to think about something really deeply, because you engage in it. You test it. You experiment. Ideas come to your head. You try them out. That’s how you learn. That’s how you develop skill. And skill is what the practice is all about.

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