A Sense of Your Materials

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When you work with the breath energies in the body, you have to get a sense of your materials. It’s like being an artist or a carpenter. If you have oil paints, you play around with the oil paints to see what they can do, to see what kind of effects you can get from mixing different colors, applying different thicknesses, all kinds of things you can do with the paints. When you work with wood, you have to know what happens when you run your plane with the grain, against the grain, across the grain. And it’s this way you get to know the wood. Again, do what you want with it. And same with the breath. We try to make a comfortable place for the mind to stay. You have to understand the present moment by working with the breath. But you also have to be sensitive to what the breath can do, what you can do with the breath. So it involves experimenting. Trying long breathing for a while, shorter breathing. Or not worrying so much about the length of the breathing, but thinking more about the quality of the breath that goes through the whole body. Expand your awareness to fill the whole body, but stay centered in one spot. Like the light of the candle here at the front of the room. The flame is in one spot, but the light goes all around the room. So focus your primary attention on the breath in that spot and see how it feels. When it feels good, then think of spreading it. Don’t spread uncomfortable energies. See how far you can spread it. And try to get a sense of when you can spread it. If you can’t spread it, what’s getting in the way? Then after a while, if you can’t figure that out, go back to maintaining your center. That’s what you can work with right now. Have a sense of what you can do and what you can’t do right now. And that sense of what the breath can do and can’t do is going to develop and grow as you work with it and stop and watch for a while. Because sometimes that’s what you have to do. Instead of adjusting the breath or anything, just stay very still and watch. Watch the breath to figure it out, then make a few more forays into adjusting it again. It’s in this way that you learn about cause and effect. You’re developing a basis for concentration, and you’re also getting some basic lessons in discernment. A while back I was reading a question and answer session that had been recorded and transcribed, in which the student was saying that she had been working with her breath and discovered that if she allowed the breath to become longer, she found it a lot easier to sit for long periods of time. And the teacher said, “Well, that’s good, but you missed your opportunity to gain some insight.” Which is very wrongheaded. How are you going to gain insight into cause and effect unless you play with things? After all, that’s what the Buddha’s most succinct description of his awakening is. He was of a principle of cause and effect. Some things you do are going to have an immediate effect; other things are going to have a long-term effect. What you’re experiencing right now is the combination of things you did in the past and things you’re doing right now. It sounds simple, but when you work out the details, it’s very complex. But you can make use of the fact that you do have choices right now that you can make, and you can shape things. In fact, if you weren’t shaping things, on some subconscious level, you wouldn’t be experiencing anything right now. The purpose of the meditation is to dig down and discover those subconscious shapings. The best way to do that is to start shaping things the best way you can, consciously. And that will open up deeper and deeper layers into the mind. So you have to poke around and play with these things if you’re going to learn anything about them. And gain a sense of what you can and cannot do with the breath. There are a lot of pains in the body that can be relieved by the way you breathe, by the way you allow the breath energy to flow in the body. There are other pains that are not going to respond. How are you going to know the difference? By trying. By working with the breath, thinking of new ways to conceive of the breath. You can think of the breath not only in the body, but as a cocoon surrounding the body. Do you have a sense of whether that cocoon feels combed out or not, or is full of snarls and tangles? If you can sense that, okay, then try to make use of that. First, comb everything out so that it’s nice and clean and streamlined. And then see what you can do to allow that surrounding breath energy to nourish the breath in the body. There are lots of ways you can think about the breath. Breath coming in from the back, coming in from down, coming in from the top of your head. There are lots of things you can do. And it’s by playing with these things that you understand them. And you get a sense of that causal principle that the Buddha was talking about. It’s like being a scientist. I’ve been reading a book about Antarctica, about the dry valleys. People have been going up into some of the most remote valleys, discovering a landscape that hasn’t changed for millions of years. They’ve found ice that’s been there for eight million years. And how did they find it? They poked around. Usually in Antarctica you’re not allowed to touch anything or take anything. But if you’re going to learn anything about Antarctica, you’ve got to get permission to poke around, dig some holes in the ice, dig some holes in the ground, pick up rocks on the blue ice, which turn out many times to be meteorites. On the one hand, you can be a tourist and just kind of look at things. But if you’re going to be a scientist and learn about things, you’ve got to poke around. One of the reasons they knew the ice was eight million years old was because there was volcanic ash on top of it. And they could date that. How did they find the volcanic ash? They were shoveling around one day. So you’ve got to dig around, shovel around, inside, play with things, see what you can do with them, and listen carefully to what responses you get from trying things. It’s as if you have to listen to the breath as well, to see what works, to see what doesn’t work, and then take advantage of what does work. That’s how you gain insight. It’s also how the concentration settles in and you develop that special balanced kind of concentration that contains both insight and stillness together. The Buddha talks about this as being the ideal way of practicing, getting concentration that’s composed of tranquility and insight in tandem. You’re still, but you’re also very alert. And in that stillness, you can try a few things and then watch the results. So it’s a combination of willing and observing. And it’s in the interplay of the two that you really learn things. In particular, you learn where the movements of the mind, the way you shape things in the present moment, is actually causing suffering that you don’t have to cause. There are some things you have to do to put the path together. You really do have to make an effort. There’s stress there, but it’s stress with a purpose. But then when you begin to realize there are some things that you do that don’t create any useful results at all, those are the ones you learn how to abandon. And again, it’s through getting a sense of your materials that you can sort out which is which. You learn which forms of fabrication are part of the truth of stress and suffering, which forms are part of the cause, and which forms are part of the path away from the end of stress and suffering. The only way you can distinguish these things is by poking around and moving around and playing with your materials. Then you become really sensitive to what they can do. you

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