Full-Body Breath

June 2, 2013

We read the Dhamma, we practice the Dhamma, and there’s a connection between the two, and there are some areas where they’re very different. We read about the Dhamma to get an idea of what’s possible, what the purpose of the practice is, and get some ideas about the tools we’re going to be using. But then to really understand what the words mean, you have to put a question mark next to them and then actually try the practice to get a sense of what in the text is referring to, what you’re actually experiencing right here, right now. And sometimes the text can get in the way. You’re anticipating a little bit too much sometimes in the beginning, and you may get discouraged. That’s when you put them down and say, “Well, what are you experiencing right now?” You’ve got the breath coming in and going out. Ask yourself, “Where do you experience it?” You know eventually you’re going to be experiencing it through the whole body, or you’re supposed to be experiencing it through the whole body. And maybe you already are and don’t know it. But focus on what you do see, what you do sense. Then there’s the question mark. Ask yourself how comfortable it is. Does it feel okay? You read about rapture, intense pleasure, and it doesn’t seem to be much rapture and pleasure in the way you’re breathing. In the very beginning, start out with what feels okay. Don’t push things too much. Don’t squeeze things too much. You may find that in order to make yourself more clearly aware of where the in-breath begins and where the out-breath begins, you put a little squeeze at the end of each breath. That doesn’t help. It makes it unpleasant. So wherever you notice that you’re adding a little bit of extra tension that’s not necessary, see what happens if you let up on that tension. Because there is a certain amount of pressure you have to put on your awareness of the present moment in order to stay here. Otherwise, the mind just goes floating off. But if there’s too much pressure, it starts getting restrictive, you feel confined, and then you look for a way out. If you have trouble sensing what’s going on, breathe for a long way in and a long way out for a little while, and then say, “Okay, now I’m going to do short,” and then try to compare the two. See what differences you notice. Then try heavy and then light, and then you can combine them. If you like short and heavy, long and heavy, light and short, light and long, mix things up in various ways to give yourself a sense of what’s available, what’s possible. The important thing is that you’ve got your awareness right here at the present moment, wandering off someplace else. As you can begin to settle in, however much of the body you’re aware of, the more the better, of course. But stay with what you can notice. The reason more is better is because the more fully you inhabit the body, the easier it is to stay here. You feel more grounded. You’re not being squeezed out. And the ability to stay with the whole body is useful not only while you’re sitting here trying to get the mind to settle down. It’s also useful in lots of other ways. I mentioned one of those this afternoon. When you’re surrounded by a lot of people and you’re noticing that their energy is very frenetic and you’re beginning to pick it up, it’s because you’re not fully inhabited. You’re not inhabiting your own body. It’s giving a space, giving an opening for their energy to come in. The image in the Canon is of a ball of clay. If someone were to throw a stone into the ball of clay, it would make a big dent in the ball of clay because the ball of clay is soft. It doesn’t offer any resistance. So you’ve got to make your sense of the body complete. The sense of the breath energy in the body is as complete as you can make it. The breath energy fills everything, all through the nerves, the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body. And nothing else can penetrate. You’re fully occupying your space and nobody else can move in. The image for this in the Canon is of a door made out of hardwood. If anyone tries to throw a ball of string at it, it just bounces right off. This doesn’t mean you’re totally insensitive to other people’s energies. In fact, often this way you’re more acutely aware of what exactly their energies are, because you’re not getting your energies mixed up with theirs. But the important thing is you’re not being invaded. The other reason why you want to develop a full body awareness is because you want to make your awareness all around. As you get more sensitive to this, you begin to realize that when a thought forms, there’s going to be a stirring someplace in the breath energy in the body. And at that point it’s hard to say whether it’s breath or whether it’s mind energy, but there’s a stirring right at the boundary. And the more sensitive you are to the various breath energies in the different parts of the body, the more quickly you’ll pick this up. And also, the more quickly you’ll be able to do something about it. I call it zapping. There’s a little tangle of energy there, and you just zap it and it totally gets fried and untangled. Nothing can grow there. This way you can catch your thoughts before they really form into a clear thought. After all, this is at the boundary between your physical and mental energy. And there’s a point where you choose. What is this? Is this a physical phenomenon or is it the basis for a mental phenomenon? Is it a thought? If it’s a thought, what’s it about? That’s when you start getting entangled. You say, “Oh, this is a thought about something that happened at work last week,” or, “This is a thought about a plan I have for next year,” or whatever. Then you go with it. You’ve left your frame of reference here in the present moment and you’ve gone someplace else. If you can maintain a full body awareness, it’s a lot easier to see these thoughts forming and catch them as quickly as you can. And even if they form into a coherent thought, you don’t have to anticipate or enter into them because you’re inhabiting the body, you’re not inhabiting the thought. So this ability to fill the body with your breath, fill the body with your awareness, is an important skill that we develop in the meditation. When the breath feels good, you begin to realize there are potentials for pleasure and even potentials even for rapture and refreshment in different parts of the body. You can tap into them and make the most of them. As the Buddha says, once there’s a sense of pleasure or rapture, you can allow it to spread. The image he has is of a bathman. Back in those days, they didn’t have soap. They used kind of the bath powder that you would mix with water, kind of like a dough for making bread. You mix the flour with the water and then you bathe with that. You want to make sure that the water fills this little ball of bath powder the same way that the water would fill the dough of the bread. You have to knead it into it. In other words, you’ll notice that sometimes you breathe in, breathe out, and the subtle breath energies are here or there. Some of them don’t move very well. They seem to be blocked. So you have to figure out some way to get around the blockage. Try not to use physical pressure and notice. Instead, how do you think about what’s going on in the body with the breath? You have to remember that the breath doesn’t necessarily have to be obstructed by anything at all. It can go through anything solid, because, after all, it is energy. Energy can pass right through atoms. Hold that perception in mind. You begin to be able to read when there’s too much up-going energy in the body, when there’s too much down-going. If there’s too much up-going energy, you start getting headaches. If there’s too much down-going, you start getting drowsy. Again, how do you perceive the movement of energy in the body? Try to find a perception that’s helpful, that makes you feel balanced. Everything is all around. You’re here in the midst of the breath. That way you can settle in. You can have the present moment here as you’re sitting. You can have it in your body as you’re going through the day. When you’re grounded like this, you’re not the only person who benefits. The people around you benefit as well. You’re less likely to be giving in to greed, aversion, and delusion because you don’t feel so starved for a quick fix. You’re not piling irritation on top of yourself so that minor irritants of the day don’t seem all that bad. And you’re not allowing them to come in because you’re not trying to feed on them. John Lee has a nice image. He says, “It’s when we give these things their freedom, that’s when we’re free.” In other words, we’re not trying to feed on these things. We don’t try to take them in. And then they’re fine. Then we’re fine. There’s a sense of being disconnected. It’s not disconnected in the sense of apathetic or not interested. It’s disconnected in the sense that you’re not trying to feed on these things. In response, they don’t chew on you. In fact, one of the signs of the fact that you really are fully aware here is that you are aware of what’s going on with other people. You can pick up their energies very easily, but you’re not feeding on them and you’re not inhaling them. They’re there. You’re sensitive to them. This part of the practice, meditation, is often missed because people go to meditation retreats where the teachers are there and they’re putting in their time and then they’re going to go. The Buddha’s model, though, is that you stay with a teacher. Then you want to become really sensitive to what the teacher wants out of you. It’s a different kind of sensitivity training. It’s not getting in touch with your feeling. It’s putting yourself in a position where you can sense what the other person is feeling, what the other person wants, and you’re willing to respond. When that relationship is healthy, you learn a lot about yourself, you learn a lot about people who’ve really gained experience in the path, how they approach things. And finally, when you’re educated, you learn a lot about how energy fills the body, how it’s flowing well. You’re actually giving off a good energy to other people. So the people who have a lot of empty spaces in their own energy are going to be picking up good energy from you. It’s a gift. This is one of the nice things about the practice. The Buddha doesn’t draw hard and fast lines between your happiness and other people’s happiness. He’s noticed the ways in which you can develop happiness for yourself that also spills over for other people. There’s generosity, there’s virtue, and the meditation spills over as well. So keep in mind, this is a really important part of the practice. Not just while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but all through the day. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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