Safety in Your Own Space

October 19, 2013

When you feel the body from within, what is it that allows you to feel it? It’s the breath. The breath here means not only the in-and-out breath, but also the breath energy that flows through the nerves, flows through the blood vessels. That’s what allows you to know that you’ve got arms and legs and torso and a head. All the parts of the body are sitting right here. That sensation, what they call proprioception, is mediated through the breath. So when you get in touch with just the feeling of having a body, you’re already in touch with the breath on different levels. The trick is learning how to stay here. Part of that trick is to get in touch with the breath energy so that it feels good. It feels good coming in, it feels good going out. Try to survey the body to see where there’s any tension that might block some of the flow of that energy. And also notice the rhythm of your breathing. Some people find that it’s best to start with playing with the rhythm of the breathing. Find one spot where the breath is most prominent. When that spot gets comfortable, then you spread your awareness together with that sense of comfort to other parts of the body until you have a sense that the whole body is all breathing together. Another approach is to work the other way around. Start with a sense of the whole body. Try to be aware of everything from the head down to the toes. And when you maintain that whole body awareness, what does that do to the way you breathe? Sometimes it helps to have a perception that when you’re breathing in, the energy flows everywhere. It’s not just a little bit of air coming through those little tiny holes in your nose, but it’s an energy that can come in and out anywhere in the body. That can open things up quite nicely. Years back, when I had malaria, I found one day that just the act of breathing was very laborious. Because what happens when you have malaria is that the parasites are eating up your red blood cells, so you’re not getting much oxygen, and the muscles that do the breathing are getting overworked, starved of oxygen. I realized this because I was holding one picture of how the breathing worked in mind. So I changed the picture, thought of the breath energy coming in all the spots that Ajahn Lee mentions all at once. The forehead, the top of the head, throat, middle of the chest, down above the abdomen. Think of them all opening up at once. And that took a lot of the pressure off the muscles that had been overworked, other muscles pitched in. It made the breathing process a lot easier. So you might want to examine the picture you hold in your mind of what’s actually happening when you’re breathing. Change that picture in a way that makes the breathing feel lighter, easier, more nourishing. What you’re doing is you’re creating a stronghold for yourself here in the body, a place where you know that it’s safe for you to be. And it’s your spot. As long as you don’t let other people’s energies come and invade you, you’re fine. And the best way to do that is to fill the body with your own good breath energy, fill the body with your own awareness. And maintain that as much as you can. This is a skill to develop not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through life. Because when you’re dealing with other people, you’re going to need your protection from other people. If you feel exposed, you know what happens when people feel threatened? They lash out, out of fear. And it’s hard to remain equanimous when you’re feeling exposed and threatened that way. But if you can fill the body with good awareness, fill the body with good breath, and be convinced this is your safe spot, then you realize that other people cannot invade this spot. You don’t feel so threatened. You don’t feel so exposed. And you’re likely to act in a much more skillful way. Because your actions are coming from a sense of well-being. So this is one very immediate way of showing goodwill for yourself and also providing yourself with protection. A lot of the Buddhist teachings are on this issue of protection. This is why refuge is such an important part of the Buddhist vocabulary. Even the very beginning of the chant, we go to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha for refuge. It’s because you realize there are dangers in life. There are dangers from outside, of course, but there are also the dangers of your own actions, the things you will do out of a sense of fear, out of ignorance, out of craving. It’s not, of course, that the Buddha’s going to come down and take care of your enemies for you or make the dangers go away. He gives you a good example. This is how someone who is totally safe behaves, and this is the path to going to total safety. The word refuge is not just a beginning word in the Buddhist vocabulary. Refuge is actually one of the names for Nirvana. It’s a safe place. It’s a haven. It’s a harbor. It’s an island above a flood. As the Buddha said, skillfulness begins with a sense of danger. That’s part of this idea of heedfulness, realizing there are dangers outside, there are dangers inside, and you’ve got to do something about it. The reason heedfulness is a working concept is because you can do something about them. If there were dangers that there was no protection against, heedfulness wouldn’t make any difference. You’d just be hit by these things willy-nilly regardless. But if you have a sense, okay, there are dangers outside, there are dangers inside, but the way you act, the way you speak, the way you think can make a difference. So you put your energy into looking at your thoughts, words, and deeds and seeing what you can do to make them safer. Because it’s not just the outside that holds dangers. We’re dangerous people, we’re dangerous minds, and we’re dangerous to ourselves as well as to others. And so we need good examples from outside, like the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is how to behave. This is how to think. This is how to speak. This is how to act. We’ve got the skills that the Buddha left behind, the primary one being breath meditation, working with the processes of breathing in the body, noticing what ways of breathing give rise to comfortable feelings, what ways of breathing can help steady the mind when it needs to be steadied, and help gladden and uplift the mind when it needs to be gladdened and uplifted, seeing into areas where the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself and learning how to develop dispassion for those activities so you don’t keep engaging in them. All of these are steps in the breath meditation. These are the path we follow. And even before we arrive at the ultimate refuge, at the end of the path, the path does provide us with a sense of safety in the meantime, by developing concentration, you can have this sense of being safe right here, right now, regardless of what’s going on around you. And as you begin to see your mind more clearly, you begin to see where it’s creating unnecessary stress, where it’s thinking in foolish ways that are causing problems, and learning how to step back. Because one of the primary skills you’ve got to develop as you’re developing concentration is learning how to step aside from your thoughts. Don’t get in the line of fire. The mind may be thinking, thoughts may be going through, but you don’t have to go with them. Think of your awareness as a large screen, like the screen on a window. The breeze can flow through the screen, but the screen doesn’t get blown around by the breeze. Thoughts come, they can go, but you maintain your awareness here with the breath. This gives you a good foundation, a sense of security. It makes it easier to see things for what they are and to notice when your ways of thinking are unskillful. This provides refuge not only from the world outside, but also from a lot of your unskillful habits. And as you take this sense of being centered with the breath, sensitive to the breath energy in the body, as you go through the day, you begin to notice. When things from outside come in and have an impact on your mind, and also when things come welling up from within the mind and have a disturbing impact on your concentration. If you don’t have this as your frame of reference, you just go your ordinary way, and things come and they go, and they go in and go out. You lose track of where these energies are coming from, what’s coming from within you, what’s coming from outside. It all gets mixed up. And when everything inside and outside gets all mixed up like that, you don’t have any sense of security. Your space has been invaded. But if you have this reference, you can notice, “Okay, that was a sight that had an impact on the mind.” Or, “That was the words of somebody else that had an impact on the mind.” Or, “Here comes greed, aversion from within the mind itself.” If you can say with the breath, at the very least, you don’t get washed around by these currents. So that whatever happens, it’s not invading your space, because you’re occupying your space. And with that sense of security also comes some insight. Just the ability to step back and realize you don’t have to go with these thoughts, you don’t have to go with the impact that’s coming from within. And without that right there is a very useful insight. And as you dig deeper, you begin to see where these things come from, particularly what’s coming from within the mind. Because if the mind weren’t churning out a lot of unskillful stuff, it wouldn’t be influenced by unskillful things from outside. And when you can see these things and realize that they’re optional, the suffering you’ve been creating for yourself is optional, that’s when you can let go of the cause. Those Four Noble Truths that the Buddha taught at the beginning of his teaching career, like we chanted just now, basically come down just to that cause and effect. We practice the path because it attacks the cause of suffering. And when that cause is taken care of, there may be stress in the world, but it’s not having an impact on the mind. That’s when the mind really is separate. The text describes it as having a sense of, you know things are there, there’s a sense of touch, a sense of contact, but the contact has a sense of being disjoined. In other words, it’s not invading you because you’re not going out and trying to feel or feed on things outside. It’s because you’re looking for nourishment outside that you open yourself up to outside influences. In other words, you open your mouth and things come in. The mind opens its mouth and things come in. But when the mind is well-nourished from within, it doesn’t have to eat from outside. So things are there, there’s a contact, but there’s a sense of being separate. All things are seen as being separate. That’s not a sense of alienation. It’s simply a sense of total safety. So try to create this safe haven for yourself here in the mind. Or at least try to get the path together here and have this sense of being centered right here, with balance, with right view and all the other right factors of the path. Even though the path itself is not the ultimate refuge, it provides an awful lot of safety along the way.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2013/131019_Safety_in_Your_Own_Space.mp3.mp3>