Six Properties

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Focus in on your breath and have a sense that this is where you really belong. This is your space. This is your home. It’s good to have your own space like this because we live in a world where there are a lot of things that we can lose outside. Things change outside very easily. And if you don’t have a good, solid center inside, it’s easy to get blown away. So what do we have here? The Buddha talks about having four properties in the body, and then there’s also the property of space and the property of consciousness. The language may sound unusual and maybe a little bit old-fashioned, but we tend to think of old medieval chemistry with the various elements that don’t correspond to our ideas of what elements are. That’s one of the reasons why I like to translate it as “property.” Your sense of how you directly experience your body from within needs a vocabulary, and English doesn’t provide much of one. So try the Buddhas. When we focus on the breath, that’s the wind element inside. The Buddha relates it to different winds in the body, particularly in our breath. He says it’s the wind that goes through all the organs of the body. You call it chi in China, brahna in Hindu teachings, lom in Thai. It’s a sense of movement, sensation, sense of energy, and it’s there throughout the body. And when you get sensitive to that fact, you can begin to realize that there are times when it’s flowing well and times when it’s not flowing well. Just learning to see it as energy helps a lot. It also helps to realize that this is your most immediate sense of the body. We tend to think of the body as a solid lump that we move around. Well, how do we move it around? It’s through the breath. The breath is the mind’s most immediate interface with the body. It’s what lets us know that there is a body here. And also, through the mind’s pressure on the breath, this is how we move the body to hold that perception in mind. And you begin to realize that the areas where the breath isn’t flowing so well are the areas where you can open up the breath channels. The closing of those breath channels is as much psychological as it is physical. So think of the breath being connected in all parts of the body. Think of sections that don’t feel all that connected. Just picture them to yourselves as being connected. Areas where you tend to hold things tightly in order to maintain your posture. See if you can relax them. And still maintain your posture. That gets you sensitive with the breath. You can work with the other elements as well. But the jhanfu would usually have you wait until you’d worked very thoroughly with the breath, because the breath is the most sensitive and most changeable of the elements. And it’s the element that, as the jhanlis says, watches over and has some controlling influence on. At the same time, you can work with the other elements even when the breath isn’t all that well taken care of. But the effect will be hit or miss. Sometimes you need it when it gets really hot like this. It’s nice to find a nice cool spot in the body. Ask yourself which parts of the body are cooler than others. When you feel a sensation of coolness, again, that’s water. Focus in on that. On days when it’s cold, you can focus in on the heat. When you’re feeling lightheaded, focus in on the earth. When the body’s feeling stiff, go back to the breath. But in order to work consistently with these elements, it’s good to have practice with the breath first. As I said in jhanfum, you wait until the breath is totally still. In other words, your concentration is strong enough that your awareness fills the body, the breath fills the body, and the mind is settled in with a sense of equanimity. And the breathing gets more and more and more refined until finally it stops. Then you learn how to hold that in place. There’s just the perception that’s holding it. You’re not holding onto the breath. You’re not tightening up anywhere in the breath, because that would spoil the effect. But when you learn how to balance things so that all it requires is just the perception of breath filling the body, then you can stay there. You don’t require any more anchoring or adjusting or thinking or evaluating than that, just breath, just that perception. That’s when working with the elements gets really interesting. You just think fire, warmth, and you immediately sense, okay, there are these warm parts of the body. And then you work with the warm parts the same way you would with the breath. Think of the warmth spreading around. If it starts getting too hot, then you think of water to cool you down. And then to complete everything, you have earth. And if any of these feel out of balance, you can balance the earth with the breath. You can balance the water with the fire so things feel just right inside. And see if you can maintain that sense of just right. It requires poise, steady but light touch, and teaches you many important lessons, particularly the importance of your perceptions, how your perceptions shape the way you experience things. It also teaches you some important lessons about concentration. In the beginning, we have to do all kinds of things to get the mind concentrated. You have to think about this, adjust that, select the Thai proverb about the mind, and then, as you’re looking for the second crab, the first crab is already trying to crawl out. You get two crabs in, and then you look for the third, and the first two are crawling out. That’s the way it is in the beginning stages of concentration. You get one thing right, and whoops, something else is gone. But after a while, you begin to gather things in, gather things in, gather things in, and they stay. And when there’s a sense of well-being, you don’t have to watch over them all the time. That’s why the deeper levels of concentration have fewer factors than the earlier ones. The earlier ones require that you look at this, look at that, adjust this, adjust that. As the mind settles in, it requires less effort to maintain the concentration, which is why there’s a greater sense of lightness. As the mind settles in, it feels balanced and poised. You also learn, after a while, once you’ve gotten used to being with a sense of the body being still and all of the properties being in balance, that as the movement of the breath dies down, you’re a sense of the shape of the body. It begins to dissolve. Look at John Lee’s images of little dots of mist with space in between the mist. Don’t go to the space quite yet. Just notice it’s just little dots here and there, and there really is no outline. It’s like those pictures by Seurat. We didn’t draw any outlines. It’s just dots, dots, dots of color. Then you can think about the space between the dots. Between the molecules, even within the atoms, there’s more space than there is matter. Someone was saying the other day, if you have a baseball to represent the nucleus, and the baseball stadium, the far edges of the baseball stadium, there’s that much space inside each of your atoms. You can hold that perception in mind as the outline of the body begins to disappear, and all of a sudden you find yourself with a strong sense of space all around, and there’s no end to it. You learn how to stay with that perception. Again, this works best when you’ve had practice in holding on to one perception steadily. From there, you can turn to look at the mind. Not so much the mind as the thinking organ, but just awareness of the space. What is the consciousness? What is the awareness? What is the knowing, knowing, knowing that knows all this? Learn how to stay with that perception. And now we’ve covered all six elements. In the past, when Jon Fung had one student who was very strong in her powers of concentration, she was always having trouble keeping things in balance. She found out later that this was after many, many months of frustration because she couldn’t get things quite right. Too much of one, too much of the other. She was visualizing them. In other words, when she thought of the breath, she’d think of a wind blowing when she thought of water. She’d think of an image of water. Fire would be a fire, and so on. She was able to get as far as space. But then she couldn’t turn around to the awareness because she wanted a symbol or she wanted an image to focus on. She couldn’t think of an image of consciousness. So we’re not focusing on the images. We’re focusing on the actual feeling, how things feel from within. This has all kinds of uses. Another one of Jon Fung’s students, a woman who’d been practicing with him for a while, then he left and went to another place and she didn’t know where he’d gone. So she continued to practice on her own. One night she was sitting in meditation and this voice came to her and said, “You’re going to die tonight.” And her body really did feel. She was used to finding a nice spot someplace in the body where she could set her attention. And that night there was no place at all. She said it was like being in a house on fire. You couldn’t go into any of the rooms. Everything was on fire. And then she thought of space. So she focused on the space and didn’t have to worry about the other elements being all in a turmoil. She stayed there for quite a long while, then came back and everything had settled back down. She didn’t die. Of course, otherwise she wouldn’t have been able to tell the story. But the lesson she learned was that when things are really out of balance in the body, you can always go to space. And if you can’t think of any better place to go when you die, space is a good element to be hanging out in as the body. So try to get a handle on this vocabulary, because it really helps you understand how you’re experiencing the body from within. The Buddha calls it rupa, or form. This is what he’s talking about. And you can use the understanding that comes from this vocabulary, not just as a list of words, but as a way of getting a handle on it. And how you experience the body from within and ways you can manipulate that experience so the body becomes a better place to settle down. And as I said, at the same time you learn a lot of interesting lessons about perception. Once you’ve got the vocabulary and you see how useful it is, it becomes more and more natural to think in these terms. And again, the benefits come from having a working vocabulary for how you experience the body from within.

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