Fluent in the Breath

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We once had a monk come to stay with us for the rains retreat. He came from Thailand. And shortly after he arrived, we took him to the north rim of the Grand Canyon. One day we took him out on the Bright Angel Trail, which goes along the edge of a little peninsula going out into the canyon. It’s a fairly sharp drop-off. And here he was, a monk, who’d spent a lot of time in the forest in Thailand, and he was scared of heights. He took one look at the trail and he said he wasn’t going to go. So we let him stay up near the lodge. As we came back, we saw him from a distance talking to some Westerners. I didn’t know that he knew English. So we asked him, “What did you say with him? How did you talk with the Westerners?” He said, “I know English. I use ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ How do you know what you’re saying ‘yes’ to? How do you know what you’re saying ‘no’ to?” This is the problem with learning a language. You have to start out small. In his case, he was a little bit overconfident. But the other problem of being underconfident is also a problem. It’s the same with the breath. You learn a couple of techniques, and you have to realize that one particular way of focusing on the breath or of putting the breath through the body is not going to cover every circumstance. It’s like learning dialogues in a language. You learn some standard dialogues, and then you have to learn how to take the sentence structures and then put your own meanings in. Things actually mean something to you, things that are appropriate for the circumstances. It takes a while to build up that confidence. You have to be willing to make mistakes in order to learn how to do things well. Again, it’s the same with the breath. To be fluent with the breath, you have to try out different ways of thinking about the breath energy. Sometimes you don’t realize that certain things are possible. This is why we have instructions. So you don’t have to start from total ignorance and total uncertainty. We have the basic principles that Chandraji talks about. The breath going down the back. But you also notice, if you start reading more of his Dhamma talks, that there are times when he talks about the breath coming up the back. The breath coming up, say, from your navel up to the head. Or the breath coming from the soles of your feet up the back to the head. The breath coming in from the front. The breath coming in from the back. There are all kinds of ways that you can work with the breath. So you want to be able to use your imagination. There is a grammar here. In other words, there are certain things that you can’t do, and you find those out on your own. And there are other things you can. Several times I asked Ajahn Phuong to write his own book on breath meditation. He always refused. He said, “Well, all the basic principles are there with Ajahn Lee.” I said, “Well, there are all these other little tricks that Ajahn Phuong had.” You can’t find them in Ajahn Lee. One was that he learned that he tended to have headaches when he was young. He said, “If you thought of the breath going down the back and then out the tailbone into the ground, that would alleviate the headaches.” You don’t find that in Ajahn Lee. But it was one of the techniques that Ajahn Phuong used, and I found that it worked with my own migraines sometimes. But not always. That’s when I had to start using it. Using my own ingenuity and trying out different things. Sometimes the way I would focus would worsen the headache, and other times I found that it would make it better. Sometimes I found that work today wouldn’t work next week. But just because it worked today and doesn’t work next week doesn’t mean you throw it away, because there may come a time again when it’s going to work again. So you try to build up a repertoire and build up your vocabulary. You build up a few sentence structures that you know are going to be useful, and then you play variations on them. And sometimes you find that, again, it’s like learning a foreign language. Things you ordinarily can’t do in your own language, you find you can say in another language. So there are possibilities here that you may not expect. That means you have to keep on experimenting, keep on trying things out, and, again, be willing to make mistakes. Notice when there are mistakes. When you’re learning a language, you have somebody to tell you. In your own case, you find you have to learn how to trust your own sense of your body. You need to focus on the breath in a certain way. It may feel good for a while, but after a while it’s not quite so good. Remember that. Other times you find that there’s a new way of breathing that works for several days in a row. You think you’ve finally got the key to keeping the mind concentrated. But then after a while, again, it doesn’t work. So don’t throw away the key. Just keep it as part of your collection, part of your repertoire. So the breath becomes your own. You become fluent in the ways of the breath in the body. There’s a breath that runs along the skin. There’s a breath that runs outside of the skin, like a cocoon around the body. In Chan Foo, we’re talking about the breath in your bones. If you hold that concept in mind and check around and see what would correspond in your awareness to a breath in your bones, you may find that there’s something that is helpful. In Chan Lee, he talks about breath channels in the body, kind of like the chi channels that the Chinese talk about. How do you sense those? Some people seem to have an immediate, intuitive sense. Other people find it takes a while. I fell into that second category. It took me a while to get used to these things. But once I got a sense of what Chan Foo was talking about, what Chan Lee was talking about, I found that I too could play around with the breath. This is what every meditator has to do. The way you sense your body from the inside is something only you know. And each of us is going to have our idiosyncrasies. So be willing to experiment. Take the general principles and play with them. This is how you get to know the body from within. You make another comparison. It’s like learning a musical instrument. In the beginning, you play your scales, you learn the basics, but then you find there’s a song that you want to play on the instrument. You’ve never played it before, so you go off to a room by yourself so you don’t bother other people. And you play, you try around, until something finally makes sense, finally works. And then maybe there’s a new song that you want to make up. So this playing around here is not a waste of time. You get to know what’s possible and what’s not possible in the body. And you try to use your ingenuity. As I’ve said many times before, the two words that Chan Foo and I would use most was “use your ingenuity” and “be observant,” “use your powers of observation.” These are the two aspects of discernment. This is how wisdom arises in getting to become familiar with what’s going on in your body, what’s going on in your mind. Kurt Vonnegut made an interesting comment. He said, “Scientists are like little kids. They keep playing with things.” You have to have that attitude of being a little kid when you play with the breath. Again, it’s like learning a language. Your willingness to be a little kid in that new language makes it a lot easier to pick things up. So think of the concentration as a game. It’s a game with a serious purpose, but it’s also something to enjoy. As with any game, you have to develop your own style, your own approach, your own repertoire, of how you’re going to play that game. And then it becomes yours. This is what the meditation is all about, to get you familiar with what you’re already doing and seeing where you, without knowing it, have been forcing the breath into strange patterns. If you find there’s pressure in the head, okay, focus away from the head. If there’s pressure in your chest, get away from the chest. Let the head and the chest relax for a while. You may have a subconscious perception that when you breathe in, you have to put pressure on the chest or pressure on the head or pressure on your neck someplace just to reassure yourself that, yes, the breath is coming in, the breath is going out. And hold in mind the possibility that maybe it’s not necessary to have that pressure and the breath will still come in, still go out. Sometimes it’s helpful to think of the opposite. If the breath is tight in your chest, focus your attention on your back. Think of the breath coming in from the back. If the pressure is in your head, think of the breath coming up from the soles of your feet. Learn how your perceptions shape the way you breathe and how the way you breathe has an impact on how it feels to be here in the present moment. This is what all this playing around is about. You want to be comfortable here in the present moment so you can watch it clearly. If you’re in phase with the body only intermittently, you get little glimpses of something but you’re not really sure of what’s going on. You have to stay here steadily. And to stay here steadily, you have to feel at ease here, realizing that this is where you belong. So do your best to become fluent in the breath, so that you have a sense that this is where you belong, that you’re a confident being here. That will allow things to open up inside. Again, it’s like learning a foreign language. You get to know other people you wouldn’t have known otherwise, and on a level you wouldn’t have known. So make yourself fluent in your own breath.

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