The Physics of Emotions

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When you breathe well, in a way that provides a sense of nourishment for the body and the mind, it’s an act of kindness, an act of goodwill for yourself and for other people. For yourself, you carry yourself in a way that’s not loading the mind down. As the Buddha said, we’re not afraid of pleasure that accords with the Dhamma and we don’t load ourselves down unnecessarily. And breathing uncomfortably is really unnecessary. There’s nobody forcing us to do it. It’s just that we’ve developed a habit for one reason or another, and it’s good to unlearn that habit if it’s causing stress for the body and stress for the mind. Because when there’s a lot of stress in the body and the mind, one, you can’t think straight. Two, it doesn’t feel really good. You’re going to be here, you’re going to be running off someplace else. Three, it’s bound to come out in your actions. You’re carrying around a fair amount of weight and you want to share it out with other people, just to lighten the burden a bit, none of which is helpful for anybody. So try to breathe in a way that’s really nourishing, that feels really good down through the torso. Down through the legs, the shoulders, the arms, down the back, all around the head. Down the arms to the tips of the fingers, down the legs to the tips of the toes. See if there’s any part of the body that tends to get neglected and give it some special attention tonight. I was talking yesterday to someone who’s broken his foot, and one of the problems is that one of the broken bones is in the outer edge of the foot, down toward the little toe. And that’s a part of the body that tends to get neglected. The circulation doesn’t go very well there. So if you find that that’s a part of the body you’ve neglected, well, give it some time tonight. Just make a survey of the body. Ask the different sections of the body, “Which of you would like some breath energy right now?” and see who responds. And some of them will be shy. So take some extra care to survey to see who’s not speaking up. Some parts of the body will immediately ask for attention. The area around the heart is a primary one. So give it some attention, but then start looking at the parts that don’t get attention and see to what extent you’re putting pressure unnecessarily on different parts of the body. That’s bound to come up in your different emotions. People have noticed, say in the case of Freud, that he talks about emotions as if it were a question of fluid mechanics. You put too much pressure on this liquid in this part of the body, and it’s going to go running off to another part of the body. And he treats the mind that way as well. You put too much pressure on some emotion, you suppress it, you repress it, bear down on it, and that’s just going to push it off someplace else. That’s where it’s going to explode, like the thing. Actually, all of our emotions take on qualities of all four different elements—earth, water, wind, and fire. Because what is an emotion, if not a thought, that’s gotten into the body, and then it picks up some of the qualities of the body. We may find that we have an unconscious tendency to push, say, the blood around in different parts of the body. When you’re really angry, the blood goes right up to your forehead. Things get churned up in your stomach. How can you breathe to diffuse that? We’ve learned this habit as a little child. If we really wanted to let our parents know how really angry we were, that’s what we did. We pushed the blood to a different part of the body, to the point where we felt we were going to explode. And then we’d explode it. And then we’d carry that habit around. So if you notice that you’re putting pressure on yourself, see if you can lighten the pressure by the way you breathe. Other emotions are like fire. And John Lee gives an example. His example is based on the fact that the word for fire in Thai is the same as the word for electricity. He says we all have steam. Steam turbines inside, and they’re spinning, spinning, spinning. And every time a little something comes in the course of the day, just a little bit of irritation or a little bit of whatever, we spin some more. He says our eyes and our ears are like exposed wires. As soon as the slightest little thing comes along, a shock, an electric bolt goes out. And your emotions are like fire. What can you do to reduce the spinning? A lot of it has to do with that issue of something irritating you, and then you carry it around. It’s not only like fire. Sometimes it can get like earth. You just weigh it down, weigh it down, weigh it down until you can’t stand it anymore. It seems so heavy. Everything breaks down. Then there are emotions that are more like wind. They just kind of blow through you and leave a wreckage. So try to notice which kind of emotions you have, or which combination. Like the pressure building up, that’s liquid, plus the fact that it’s pushing against something solid. The breath energy is what’s helping push. And this often happens when there’s a lot of pressure built up like that, then there’s more heat. People talk about their emotions as if they were fire or liquid or whatever, and that’s because, as I said, they’re in the body in addition to being in the mind. So we use the breath as our regulator. And it sensitizes us, too, as we go through the day. If some issue gets you set off, there’ll be a little hitch in the breath, a little something will let you know that something’s wrong. And you can’t let those things build up. You’ve got to breathe through them immediately. They’re not innocent, in the sense that they don’t just go away and leave you free without a trace. They tend to build up. So you’ve got to think of ways of cutting through the connections, because this little irritation will then connect to that little irritation. And they don’t have to be connected. We’re the ones who do the connecting. There’s a narrative that goes on, “This problem, this person did this, and then did it again. Then this happened, and this happened.” It all becomes part of a story. So in addition to cutting through the patterns of tension in the body through the way you breathe, you start cutting through those unskillful narratives. Think of yourself as an editor. This is a narrative that would be worth reading. Most of them are not. So you use your editor’s shears to cut through all the connections that would connect this little irritation with that little irritation, with this little bit of lust with that little bit of lust, or greed, or whatever. Attack these things from both sides, both from the mental side and from the physical side. And use the breath particularly on the physical side. Because when things get into the body, they develop a kind of momentum that goes along with the fact that you’ve got this solid emotion here. And once the emotion gets going, it connects with the body and claims the right to just keep on going. You could say, “Well, no, it doesn’t have to be that way. I can cut off the connection with it.” There will be a little bit of, maybe it’s not just a little bit, sometimes there’s a very heavy momentum in the body. The hormones are there in the blood that just keep churning, churning, churning things up. And it’ll convince you, “Oh, the emotion’s still there.” Actually, it’s just the physical side. You have the choice of saying, “Nope, I don’t want to go with that.” The body can be in a turmoil, but at least the mind can be calm. And then use the breath to help clear things up in terms of the pressure in the different parts of the body, or a lack of flow in the different parts of the body, to bring things back to normal. So because emotions have both their physical and their mental aspect, you want to be able to attack them both from the physical side and the mental side. This way, you take a huge burden off the mind. And in doing so, you take a huge burden off the people around you. Everybody benefits.

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