Fabricating the Breath (outside)

October 5, 2015

When you’re focusing on the breath, we’re doing this both to train ourselves in mindfulness and in concentration. The description of mindfulness is this. You keep focused on the body and the body, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. To be focused on means that you stay with this one object. You don’t go flitting from one thing to the next to the next. You just stick with one thing, keep watching this one thing. If you’ve ever been to Thailand, you may have seen the big red ants that they have on mango trees. If you’ve ever been bitten by one, you know how tenacious they are. You try to pull them off and they just keep biting and biting. Sometimes you pull until you’ve determined to attach the head, and the head is still biting. So you want to stick with the breath with that same kind of tenacity. The body and the body. This means the body without reference to anything else, the body in and of itself, as opposed to the body and the world. If you’re thinking about the body and the world, you’re thinking about, “Is it good looking? How do other people react to my body? Is my body healthy enough? Is it strong enough to do the work I want to do?” You want to put aside those kinds of things. Otherwise, your thoughts get pulled away from your experience right here, and you start thinking about the world out there. And that’s not where the problem is. The problem is here inside. So you just stay with the body and the body. In this case, it’s the breath. The breath coming in, the breath going out. Try to stay with the sensations. Stay in the breathing as long as you can. As for those three qualities—ardent, alert, and mindful—let’s take them in reverse order. Mindful means that you keep remembering. What do you remember? Well, one, you remember to stay here, right where you’re feeling the breath coming in and going out. And then two, you remember, if you’ve been meditating in the past and tried to stay with the breath, what things worked. What helped you stay longer. If any problems come up, you remember what to do with regard to those problems. Because you’re here not just to watch, but you’re here to develop good qualities of the mind. So you want to remember what you’ve done in the past that helps with that aim. Alert means you’re watching what’s actually happening. What are you doing, and what are the results of what you’re doing? There are other things you could be watching in the present moment, but right now you want to look at those two things—what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. As the Buddha said, the reason we suffer in the present moment is not so much about bad things coming in. It’s because we handle things in an unskillful way. Whether they’re pleasant or unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas, we can create suffering out of anything if we’re unskillful. But if we’re skillful, then we don’t have to suffer from anything, no matter how bad it gets outside, i.e., in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. It’s what we’re doing that makes all the difference. So you want to be very careful to watch what you’re doing, because this is the area where you have to change things, develop new habits. Finally, ardency, the desire to do it well, to do it with your whole heart. You’re trying to stay with the breath. You’re trying to stick with it. When the Buddha set forth his basic teachings, the big framework for understanding all of his other teachings is the Four Noble Truths. First, stress or suffering. That’s the first Noble Truth. The second one is the cause of stress. The third one is the cessation of stress. And the fourth one is the path leading to the cessation of stress. Each of those has a duty. In other words, he’s giving you the categories for dividing up your experience so you know what to do when things come up. You recognize, “Okay, this is stress. This is the cause of stress.” Then you know what to do with it. Stress is to be comprehended, which normally we don’t like to do. If stress comes up, we want to run away. We want to push it away. The Buddha says you have to comprehend it first. What is it? Where is it coming from? As with any problem, if you don’t know what it is and don’t know where it’s coming from, then you just try to get rid of it through your desires. You can often make things worse. But here we’re trying to get rid of it through knowledge, and that means we have to be able to sit with it, particularly the stress in the mind, to see where it’s coming from. Because this particular stress comes from our craving, which is the second Noble Truth. And that’s something to be abandoned. Once you see, “Okay, this is the craving that’s leading to the stress,” do what you can to let it go so that you can realize the third Noble Truth with the cessation of stress, which is the abandoning of craving. And we do that by following the path, developing the qualities of the path. So right now, as you’re staying with the breath, you’re trying to develop concentration, you’re trying to develop mindfulness, engaged in right effort. These are all things you want to develop. You’re not just watching things coming and going. You’re trying to say, “What can I do to make the breath more comfortable so I can stay here longer? What can I do to get my attention focused on the breath more continually?” Those are the duties that we have with regard to our ardency. In a John Lee’s explanation of these factors, it’s the ardency. He says, “That’s where your discernment is. That’s where your wisdom is.” In other words, you see that these are teachings not just to know about. These are teachings to put into practice. You actually make changes in the mind. And as you try to make changes in the mind, you learn a lot more about the mind than you would have just thinking about these things or reading about these things. So it’s in the actual doing that the discernment arises. And then finally, the last part of the formula, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts that have anything to do with the world right now, the world outside, just let them go. Tell yourself you’re not interested because the real work lies right here. In some cases, you’re able to just drop a thought as soon as it arises. You see, “Oh, this is pulling me away from my meditation.” You drop it and come back. Other thoughts are stickier. It’s like having gum stuck in your hand. You try to shake it off and it won’t go. This is where you have to use a solvent. The solvent here is looking at the thought in terms of where it would lead you. If I kept thinking these kinds of thoughts, what kind of effect would it have? In other words, you want to see the drawbacks of that thinking, which also has to involve seeing why you’re attracted to the thinking to begin with. Sometimes it’s harder to see the allure of that thought than it is to see the drawbacks, because you can see the drawbacks and still hold on to it, because there’s something inside that likes it. And sometimes it’s embarrassed about liking it, so it won’t tell you exactly why you like to go after these thoughts. But if you can see, “Why does this thought have an appeal? What’s its allure?” and then you can compare it with the drawbacks, you can begin to see it’s not really worth it. That helps to get the mind out of the thought and you can go back to the breath. Other times, even though you’ve analyzed the thought and seen its drawbacks, you’re still not letting go. It’s still coming back. That’s when you have to treat it like a crazy person coming to talk to you. The crazy person will try to say all kinds of things that catch your attention. And you have to just not be interested at all. And they’ll say crazier things to catch your attention, just not interested. Then it sees it can’t catch you, then it goes away. Otherwise, though, the crazy person, even if you try to chase the crazy person away, he has you. All of a sudden, you find yourself in the crazy person’s world. So you can stay with the breath. Even though thoughts are coming in the mind, your sensation of breathing is still there. So stay with that. And after a while, the thoughts will get lighter and lighter. And your sensation of the breath, your feeling for the breath will get stronger. If you get really sensitive to the breath, you begin to realize that every time a thought comes into the mind and stays there, there’s a little marker of tension someplace in the body. That’s the way the mind marks the thought so it can stay with it. It can be anywhere in the body at all. Sometimes it’s in the head, but sometimes it may be in your arm or in your stomach or in your leg. Once you sense, okay, this is the marker for that thought, the marker will come, a little bit of tension that comes when the thought takes hold. If you can see that, just breathe through the marker. Think of dissolving that little knot of tension away, and the thought won’t have anything to hang on to. These are some of the ways of getting rid of your interest in the world outside. So you can focus full attention on the body and the body, i.e. on the breath. As I mentioned yesterday, the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s your whole sense of energy flow in the body. Some of the energy flow is related to the air coming in and going out, but other areas of energy flow are more related to the flow of the blood, the flow of energy in your nerves. All of these things are related, and you want to get to know these things because you can use them to your advantage to get the mind to settle down and be really solid right here. When the Buddha talks about using the breath as a way of staying, with the body in the body, or the body in and of itself, there are four steps. The first two are simply noticing when the breath is long, noticing when it’s short, and from there you can expand it out to noticing when it’s long and deep or shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. In other words, you try to notice variations in the breath so you can see what impact they have on the body, what impact they have on the mind. So you can decide what combination of breath types you would like right now. It’s like ordering a car. You want a car with this color and with this kind of motor and this kind of suspension and this kind of upholstery. You can just go through all and take off all the things you really like here with the breath. What kind of length would you like? What kind of texture would you like? What kind of depth would you like? Put them all together. Sometimes you find something that feels really good, for a long time. Other times you find something that feels good for a little while and then it starts getting unpleasant or just boring. And then you can change again. In John Lee’s images of a cook, she finds something that her employer likes and she fixes that. But after all, the employer would get tired of having the same thing every day. So she finds ways to change the flavor a little bit, change the texture. Add new ingredients and go back to the original way again, so as to keep the employer interested. In the same way, you’ve got to work with the breath and be willing to adjust the breath several times in the course of the meditation. Now those are the first two steps. The next step is to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. Now to build up to that, you may want to notice how the breathing energy feels in different parts of the body. First, do a survey. Start around the navel and go up the front of the body, through the head, then down the shoulders. Then start at the neck, go down the back, out the legs. Section by section by section to see how the breath energy feels. How do your knees feel when you breathe in? How do your knees feel when they breathe out? How does your head feel when you breathe in? How does your head feel when you breathe out? How about your hands? Make a survey of these different parts of the body and you’ll begin to see after a while that you can connect them. It’s like building roads through a wilderness. The more roads you have, the better the communication. Until you’re aware of the whole body and it feels like the whole body is breathing together as you breathe in, breathing together as you breathe out. Pay attention to one spot, whichever spot seems most congenial, and then think of your awareness spreading out from that spot to fill the whole body. Just stay there. It’s like the light of a candle in an otherwise dark room. The flame is in one spot, but the light fills the entire room. Try to maintain that centered but broad awareness. The next step is to allow the breath, what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, which is your in-and-out breathing, to grow calm. Before it can grow calm, you first have to have a sense of fullness. Try to breathe in a way that feels like the energy channels in your body feel all full and nourished. Then the breath can grow calm. If you try to force it to grow calm, i.e., if you try to force it to stop, there’s going to be a revolt inside. As long as the body still has need for more breath energy, you can’t starve it. Give it what it needs. Until it feels saturated, think of all the nerves in your body being saturated with good energy. And then the in-and-out breathing will grow calmer and calmer. You may even get to the point where it seems it’s going to stop, which is okay. As long as you have any need for more in-and-out breathing, the body will breathe. But otherwise, with the energy all connected inside the body, and the fact that your brain is used to using less oxygen as you’re quiet, the need to breathe gets less and less. So in this way, you’re developing concentration, you’re developing mindfulness all at the same time. We sometimes read about right concentration at different levels of jhana. We can get there, but you can’t take jhana as your object. In other words, you don’t think about it while you’re doing the meditation. You think about the breath. You think about keeping the mind with the breath. As you think about the breath and evaluate the breath and get everything comfortable inside the body, you’re going to get all the factors of jhana without even thinking about them. This is how mindfulness practice and concentration practice come together and provide a good foundation for insight. This is what I mentioned just now when the Buddha talks about fabrication, the extent to which you contribute to shaping your experience right now. He says that’s the big problem. This is what the Four Noble Truths are all about, that way we fabricate and fashion our experience. It makes a difference between whether we’re going to suffer or not. Sometimes with good things we can still suffer, but if you have knowledge and skill in how you fashion things, then even unpleasant things outside will not make you suffer. So we’re focusing on what we’re doing right now because that’s the big issue in life, how we shape our experience from the raw material that comes our way. Working with the breath is a good place to start. You can start on a really basic level to reshape things from the ground up. So we shape our experience with knowledge, with skill. If we shape things with ignorance, that’s going to lead to suffering. If we shape them with skill, that turns everything into the path. It’s something to be developed. So we can find the peace, we can find the happiness, we can find the true well-being that we want that goes beyond fashioning. Something doesn’t have to be fashioned at all. But first we’ve got to fashion this thing, this breath, right now. Fashion the mind right now, in the present moment. Alert to what we’re doing, mindful, ardent, and doing it well. That’s how this path will take us to the goal that we want.

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