Understanding Breath Energies

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We spend so much time concerned with affairs of the world outside, our responsibilities outside, that we tend to neglect our responsibilities inside. How your mind relates to the body, how you experience the body directly from within. We don’t even have much of a vocabulary to describe that. So this is one of the things we do as we meditate. We put aside our outside responsibilities so that we can work on our inside ones, because no one else is going to take care of these for us. And how you relate to the body, the way you move the energy around in the body, for most of us that’s something we’re very subconscious and very unconscious of. We don’t even know we’re doing it. We have a lot of knee-jerk reactions to how we hold the body, how we respond to events, the way we breathe in response, the way the energy in the blood vessels flows. All these things are happening, and we’re hardly aware of them at all. This is going to have an impact both on the health of the body and the health of the mind. So it’s good to get to know this. So you’ve got to drop all your concerns about things outside. Look at the work that needs to be done inside. As the Buddha said, even when we just breathe in an ignorant way and think in an ignorant way, we create a lot of suffering. And by creating a lot of suffering for ourselves, we weigh ourselves down and then we’re actually less able to be helpful outside, because we’re carrying so much around already. However, we can learn to do these things with knowledge, with awareness. It can actually be a path to the end of suffering. And then, when the mind is not weighed down by suffering, you have a lot more strength to be helping yourself and other people. So when you’re working with the Brahma breath, start out with the breath energies that you do feel clearly, wherever you feel them in the body. And try to hold in mind a perception that allows the idea of breath energy in the body to make sense. I was talking this morning to a doctor, and he was saying that everything he learned in physiology told him that breath doesn’t go through the nerves, it doesn’t go through the blood vessels. Well, part of that is based on the definition of the word “breath.” And the second was that with physiology, they’re looking at your body from the outside. If they were to take your body apart, this is what they would see. But here you’re working from the body inside. That’s a part of your awareness that you can’t share with anyone else. You can’t take it out to show anyone else. This is why it’s difficult to teach the concept of breath energy to people for whom it’s new. I can’t take my breath energy out and say, “This is where it’s running. You see this happening. You see this happening here or there.” You have to get a sense of your body as you feel it from within. This is how Ajaan Fuang explained it to me. It’s the feeling of having a body. You work with that to begin with. And then you ask yourself, “Does it feel light? Does it feel tense? Does it feel open? If there’s any tension anywhere, try to relax it.” Because that’s a sign that the breath energy is blocked there. As you scan down through the body and notice where you feel tension, see what you can relax, see which knots of tension or ribbons of tension you cannot relax. Work around those for the time being. Come back to those later. Then breathe calmly. Hold in mind that idea that energy can flow anywhere in the body. And as you work with the breath energy, you find that your sensitivity to it will grow as your concentration grows. And then as you get more sensitive, that allows your concentration to grow more refreshing. So the two help each other along. A lot of times people ask, particularly around the issue of calming the mind and gaining insight, “How calm does the mind have to be before you gain insight?” Ajaan Lee’s image is good. It’s like having two legs. You have to walk with both. It’s a question of which one you’re going to emphasize at any one time. But you don’t ask, “How strong does my right leg have to be before I start using my left leg?” You use the two of them together, and they strengthen each other through walking together. It’s the same with the insight, the same with the calm of the mind. The more you understand what’s going on inside and work with it in a way that feels calming and soothing, energizing when you need energy, relaxing when you need to be relaxed, it makes the body a much more pleasant place to be. And that makes it easier for the mind to settle down. So as you survey through the body, try to notice when you breathe in, how does this part of the body feel? And then when you breathe out, how does this part of the body feel? Is there any difference? If not, move on to another part. Until you find some part of the body where, yes, it’s clear that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And you may find that you can sense this in areas of the body that you didn’t expect. So try to be thorough in your survey of the body. And go through it as many times as you like, so you get more and more familiar with this territory. If you have any thoughts of any outside, inside responsibilities come up right now, you say, “No, I’ve got these inside responsibilities I’ve got to work with.” Because the greater the sense of well-being, the sense of feeling settled and belonging in your own skin, then the more strength you’ll have to deal with those things outside. So give yourself some time. It’s not that you’re being irresponsible. It’s just that you’re learning how to manage things. Manage your attention, manage your intentions, so that they actually are helpful and you get the best results. So as you work with the breath, you can begin to get a sense, “Okay, now it’s flowing and now it’s not.” Or, “It’s flowing here, but it’s not flowing there.” And you may find that the reason for the blockage is not where you feel the blockage. Sometimes there’s a sense that the problem may actually be up in the back of your neck. The energy is not flowing well there, and then it causes trouble further down the line. So again, try to be thorough in your search, in your survey of the body. Search for any knots of tension that are causing a blockage someplace or causing a lack of flow someplace. You’ll also find sometimes that pain puts up barriers. It’s not so much the pain itself that puts up the barrier, but your perception of how things relate to the pain. As little children, we had to deal with pain. There was nobody to explain it to us. One of the things we tend to do is to tense up around the pain as a way of containing it, the subconscious idea that maybe if I can create enough tension around the pain, it won’t spread. And even though on our conscious level we realize that that doesn’t help much anymore, still there’s a subconscious way of relating to pain that can actually make the pain worse. The more you tense up around it, the less blood flow you have, and the more the tension begins to spread throughout the body. So if there’s a pain someplace in the body, even before you gain a sense of really feeling the breath energy, hold in your mind the picture that the energy can flow right down through the pain. Remember that all the atoms in your body have a lot of space, so there’s always room for something to flow. If there’s a pain in your knee, think of the energy going down the leg and then out to the tips of the toes. Don’t let it stop at the knee. It’s because you have this mental image that the pain is a barrier or a wall. That’s what creates unnecessary tension, which can then spread. So change the image. What we’re doing here is we’re using the Buddhist teachings on present karma to create a difference in how we experience the body. It’s things like our perceptions and our intentions and our attention, i.e., the questions we pay attention to, the way we frame the questions in the mind, the perceptions we hold in mind. What we want to do with all this, this is our present karma in relationship to how we’re experiencing the body right now. So look at your intentions, look at your attentions, look at your perceptions. See which aspects need to be changed. For example, if you have the perception that the breath can’t flow, that perception will get in the way. But remember, we’re not talking about physiology from the outside. It’s physiology from the inside. How do you feel your body? We do have the word proprioception in English, how you sense the body from within. So the fact that you know where your arm is right now, part of it is due to the fact that the arm may be touching your lap, your hand may be touching the lap. But it’s also part of the arm that has nothing in contact with anything. You know it’s there. What is that sensation? That’s breath. If you can hold that perception in mind, it changes things. You begin to realize, actually, your experience of the body has to come through this quality of breath everywhere in the body. If you think of the breath as being prior, in your sense of the solitude, the parts of the body that are coming later, that changes the dynamic. And it’s not a question of forcing the breath through the solid. It’s just realizing the breath is potentially there first. It’s through the breath that you sense what’s solid, so you can change the breath anywhere you’d like. And this brings you closer and closer to your own mind, your awareness of what’s going on right here, an awareness that is already there in the body, but that we tend to block out, again, because we’re so much more concerned with our responsibilities outside. We feel that this is an unnecessary luxury or it’s just a distraction. But it’s not. This is home base. This is where you’re coming from. And the more fully aware you are, the more you can sense the body from within. The more firmly grounded you’re going to be as you go through the day, through the week, through your life. You know that this area right here, nobody else can penetrate in to get unless you allow the influence from outside to come in. But you can decide you’re not going to allow it. This is your area. And when you’re dealing with other people, don’t go flowing out from this. Try to keep your sense of your hands in your hands, your sense of your feet in your feet, and don’t think of your inner self flowing out to other people. Because when you flow out, even if it’s out of compassion, you’ve lost your grounding. You’ve lost your sense of nourishment that can actually come from allowing the breath energy to be soothing and refreshing inside. And you actually weaken yourself, and you weaken your ability to be helpful. You can be in here and still be sensitive to the world outside, sensitive to the needs of other people, but also realizing that you need this area to be yours in order not to get knocked around by all the issues in the world outside. So to make this yours, you’ve got to inhabit it fully and gain an understanding of what’s really going on. And learn to talk to yourself about what’s going on inside here. This is why the Buddha’s vocabulary around breath, around earth, we’re not talking about the chemical elements, we’re talking about the properties of how you sense the body from within. Part of it is warm, part of it is cool. That’s the liquid’s part. The warm part, of course, is fire. The solid parts are earth. The energy flow is breath. And there’s space that surrounds all this and actually permeates through everything inside. When you can hold those perceptions in mind, then you can give yourself a handle on how to deal with imbalances inside. Sometimes, when you’re weak, you can find that you have resources of strength or reserves of strength that you didn’t realize you had before. Because you’re getting more and more acquainted with what you’ve got here, and you get a better sense of how to move the energies around to your advantage. Your advantage in here places no burdens on anyone else. It’s not like you’re taking advantage of anyone else. You’re just simply fully exploiting what you’ve already got here. And in John Lee’s image, it’s like having your own piece of land and just learning how to plant it with good crops instead of letting weeds grow up inside. If you have nothing but weeds on your property, where are you going to get any food? You’ve got to go steal food from other people or ask them. Either way, you’re placing a burden on them. But you’ve got your own resources here. Make the most of them. Learn how to plow your field, learn how to sow the seed, learn how to gather the crops. You have your own inner nourishment. And when you have your inner nourishment, that means you don’t have to go feeding off other people. When you’re not feeding off other people, that means that the ups and downs in their life, the ups and downs in their behavior, don’t have such a huge impact on you. You can use your strength to help them when necessary. So it’s not a selfish thing, this amount of time you’re spending here, learning to develop our own inner resources, gaining a sense of the body from within. This can be our source of strength. This can be our inner source of food. That allows us to live in the world but not be overcome by the world and actually have good things to share with the world. Because we’ve learned how to make the best use of what we’ve got. We do it fully, consciously. That’s what makes all the difference. difference.

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