A Clean Sweep

April 8, 2016

As you breathe in and out, think of the breath making a clean sweep through the body, sweeping out all the cobwebs, all the little knots of tension, all the unskillful thoughts and emotions you’ve been squirreling away through the day. This is partly for your own sake and partly for the sake of others. We’re going to have an onslaught of people this weekend, and you’ll be dealing with all kinds of people. So it’s good to have your business cleaned up first so that nothing catches inside. Part of this is going to involve working with the breath, and part of this involves your attitudes. So work with the breath first. That’s what we’re here for right now. Try to get a sense of how the breath energy flows best in your own body. This is going to be an individual matter for different people. Some people tend to have an upwelling energy, other people have a downgoing energy. Different parts of your body will have breath energy flowing well and not so well, and other people will have a different pattern. So try to explore on your own. And John Lee’s recommendations in Method Two are just for starters. I noticed when I was staying with Ajahn Furon, he had lots of other ways of playing with the breath as well. In fact, I asked him one time why he didn’t write them down as a book. He said, “Well, they’re just the minor details. The big pattern is in those seven steps at the beginning of Method Two.” But remember, it’s just a major pattern, and you’ve got to work out the details for yourself. One of the ways that helps is just thinking of this as the breath sweeping through the body. Think of there being energy channels. They can be in line with what you may have read from, say, Chinese medicine or whatever. Or they may be something else. Your sense of how they feel from within is going to be your individual sense. So work with that. So you can clean things out. When you’ve cleaned out a lot of your own problems inside like this, then it’s easier to deal with other people and their issues when they come up. Something comes up, they say something, we’ll just let it go right through. If you can’t handle the Buddhist recommendation, i.e., think of it as just an unpleasant sound that has made contact with the air. And leave it at that. At the very least, don’t have any little hidden corners or nooks inside where the words will get caught. Think of them sweeping through, and then the breath sweeping through right after them, cleaning everything out. There’s the image of the screen on a window. The breeze comes through the screen, but the screen doesn’t catch the breeze. It isn’t disturbed by the breeze. Think of the events of the day like that. And also develop some empathetic joy, being happy for the happiness of others. Let the people come tomorrow and the next day. This is part of their culture, their New Year. Getting together makes them happy. You want to be happy for them. The ability to be happy for other people’s happiness is not a healthy thing. It makes your mind a very small mind. It makes it difficult for you to enjoy your own happiness. If you resent other people’s happiness, then you’re going to start feeling guilty about your own. So learn how to be happy for other people, even if the events of the day are not the ones that make you happy. I remember my experience in Thailand with large get-togethers like this. I’d never had any time when they were fun, because I was always working. I was on the clean-up crew or the organizing crew or something. It was always work to be done. So I tended to try to stay away from events like this. The ones that I had to participate in were more like a chore than anything else. But then I began to realize that for a lot of these people this is their way of being happy, being together with other people. And I learned how to look forward to it myself. I made the burden on my own mind a lot lighter. So there’s going to be work to be done. Things to be set up, things to be cleaned up, things to be arranged. Other people’s messes you’re going to have to clean up. Just take that in stride. There was a time someone left a big mess up in the jetty. A group of people happened to be taking it up. Their plan was to meditate, and they encountered the mess, and so they spent the time cleaning up the mess. And this one woman complained, “How can anybody be so disrespectful as to leave a mess like this in the jetty?” And he said, “Don’t complain about it. They’ve given you a chance to get some merit here, cleaning up the jetty.” So it’s the same with the monastery. There’s a lot of merit in cleaning up the monastery. So look at this as your opportunity to do some good, to be generous. Both generous in your attitude toward the other people, and generous in your willingness to help. Again, that comes from having a sense of strength inside. Otherwise you get worn out pretty quickly, and the mind can come up with all kinds of reasons why it’s not happy. So you have to look and see, what are you doing that’s making yourself unhappy? Because this gets down to the Buddha’s basic principle in the Four Noble Truths that the suffering that weighs down the mind is not the suffering that comes from outside or the pain that comes from outside. It’s just there in the fact that you have a body. We’re in a world where conditions are unstable. The suffering that comes and weighs down the mind comes from within. It’s the way you’re thinking about things. It’s the way you’re shaping your own experience. You take that sensory input from outside and you turn it into something that weighs the mind down. So as we meditate, we’re trying to learn how to undo that process. We start with the breath because that’s one of the types of fabrication that the Buddha described as something that, if it’s done in ignorance, is going to lead to suffering. So bring some knowledge to this. Learn how to get acquainted with the breath. Really listen to it. What does it need? What does the body need in terms of the breathing and the energy flow in the body? What is a healthy energy flow for you? What gives you energy? What gives you a sense of strength and resilience? You want to look into that. Because the way you experience your energy is something only you can know. Other people may be sensitive. Some people may give a massage and they can sense your energy flow, but how you feel from within and how you’re going to be dealing with it, how you can redirect it, that’s something you have to find out for yourself. But it’s worth doing. So take some time. Get to know what’s needed here inside. That makes it a lot easier to adopt the right attitudes, skillful attitudes. Remember, that’s what right effort is all about. If you have a skillful mindstate, you try to let go of it and you try to prevent it from arising. If skillful mindstates have arisen, you try to give rise to them. If they’re there, you try to maintain them. Otherwise, you don’t just sit with what you’ve got. You’ve recognized that something is unskillful and you want to try to do something about it. And it’s the wanting that’s necessary. If you feel that someone’s forcing you to do that, it’s not going to work. But you have to realize, okay, you’re creating your own suffering and you’ve got to deal with it. At some point the mind says, “Yeah, I really do want to deal with this. This is something worth putting in extra time, extra energy.” It’s only in that way that the work is going to get done. So try to get to know your mind. Try to get to know your breath. Make a clean sweep inside so that things will be more clear. That way you find that you’re less of a burden to yourself, other people are less of a burden to you, and you’re less of a burden on them. It’s one of those principles that the Buddha taught, Agatami, being unburdensome. And it has all those dimensions. But it starts right here, learning how to take care of your own breath, learning how to take care of how you work with the energy inside. Because if you’re not familiar with the energy, then ignorance, greed, aversion, and delusion are going to hijack your breath energy. And you do all kinds of crazy things on impulse. And you ask yourself afterwards, “Why?” You don’t know. That’s because the energy came in and just squeezed your nerves. So try to search it out. Where do these energy knots come from? Where do you hold unhealthy energy in the body? That helps you get a handle on the problem.

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