Gather ’Round the Breath

May 24, 2017

Try to keep your mind with the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. And then keep your attention there. Notice if it’s comfortable or not. If deep breathing isn’t comfortable, you can change. Try all different kinds of breathing. Fast, slow, heavy, light, blatant, subtle. See what kind of breathing feels good for the body and what kind of breathing is easy to stay with. To stay requires a perception that you’re holding in mind. It’ll be either the word “breath” or an image you may have of where the breath is coming in, where it flows in the body. And when we’re talking about the breath as the sense of energy flowing in the body, it can come in anywhere, go out anywhere, flow anywhere. So try to hold a perception that allows the breath as much freedom as possible while you stay with it. When you get the mind concentrated, it’s said to have a single gathering place. That’s the meaning of ekagatha. In other words, you’ve got several activities going on. On the one hand, you’re clearly aware of the sensation of the breathing, but you also have a perception in mind. And you’re asking yourself some questions and making adjustments. You’re trying to attain a feeling of pleasure. You’ve got all of what the Buddha calls the aggregates right here. It may sound like you’ve got a lot of things going on, and in a way you do, but everything should be gathered around one project. That’s what makes it single. John Fuhrman, my teacher one time, had a student who, when she was focusing on the breath, didn’t focus on the sensation of the breath. Instead, she was focused on a metal image that she had. In ekagatha, divorce from the body. In fact, she stared at that image so strongly that if there wasn’t somebody to tell her how to get out, she didn’t know how to get out. She just got stuck staring. So even though the Buddha calls the concentration a perception attainment, it’s not just the perception. It’s the level that you’re going to be aware of. You’ve got to be aware of the breath or whatever else the object of your meditation is. There has to be a sensation that goes along with it. And there’ll be feelings. Feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. The amount of mental activity will grow less as the practice progresses. But in the beginning, it’s an important part. You’ve got to learn how to get your mind and the breath and your perception together so they feel right, so that it’s really stable. And that requires some adjustment. Sometimes your focus is too strong, sometimes it’s too weak. If it’s too strong, there’s a sense of constriction in different parts of the body and it begins to get uncomfortable. If it’s too weak, your mind just starts floating off. You may leave the breath and just focus on the sense of pleasure for a while. Then it’s nice for a bit, but then it gets fuzzy. And you can get into a blurred state that’s called delusion concentration. In other words, the mind is still, it feels nice, but you don’t really know where you are. That’s because you’ve lost the sensation of the breath. This often happens when the breath gets very subtle, which is one of the reasons why we try to spread our awareness to fill the whole body. Once you’re aware of the breath and it begins to get comfortable, you may want to go through the body section by section. Start down at the navel, work up the torso, then through the head, then down the spine, out the legs, go back to the neck, go down the shoulders, out the arms. Acquaint yourself with how the breathing feels in different parts of the body so that when you spread your awareness, you really are sensitive to the whole body and there’s a sense that it all fits together because you’re familiar with all the parts. Then as the breath gets more and more subtle, you still have a good, solid framework to stay with. So there’s work to be done here. We’re working around something, one thing. Ask for any thoughts that may come into the mind and let them go, no matter how interesting they may seem or how bored you may be with the breath. You’ve got to learn how to stick with the breath. Get bored with your boredom. In other words, don’t believe the boredom. Because that’s actually what’s happening here. You’re learning a new skill. And in the beginning, when it’s awkward, you want to go back to something you feel more comfortable with. But you’re never going to master the skill that way. After all, we’re here to attain something we haven’t attained before, to realize something we haven’t realized before, which means we have to do things we haven’t done before. So you’ve got to be strict with yourself. This is not a time to just wander off with whatever comes through the mind. You’re trying to get everything gathered around, just this one thing. The topic of the breath, the sensation of the breath, these things all come together. When you analyze them in terms of aggregates, they may be different things, but we bring them together and they reinforce one another. In other words, you hold the perception of the breath moving through the body, and you begin to realize there are actually physical sensations that do that. So the sensations reinforce the perception. And then when there’s a sense of pleasure that comes with that, that reinforces your desire to stay here. And if things aren’t going well, you try to figure it out. That’s the work of the fabrication. So we’ve got a lot of activities going on here. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha describes Sariputta’s analysis of what’s going on in jhana, and it’s very complex. You can see different kinds of mental movements. You can sort them out as to what they are. We don’t have to go to that extent. But it’s good to realize you can’t just stick with a perception, in other words, just the image in mind, or just the feeling. You’ve got to be grounded in the breath. And then learn to use whatever perceptions help you stay here. One perception I found useful is to think of the body as a sponge. When you breathe in, the energy is coming in from all directions. The pores of your skin are like the holes in a sponge. Or you can have the perception that it’s not the case that you’re on one side of the body looking at the breath. You’re actually surrounded by the breath. It’s bathing you on all sides. That way, any hidden patterns of tension that may lie in the breath can be in the background. You get a chance to get loosened up. So, say, the tension you may feel in your spine gets a chance to relax. And as that relaxes, you have a sense of energy flow going through the spine that wasn’t there before. If you’re not clear about the flow of the energy in the body, you can just make a survey around the body and say, “Where is there tension?” Kind of relax that tension. And a good way to check is to look at the two sides of the body, the left and the right. Compare your left shoulder with your right shoulder. Do they have the same amount of tension or not? Which side holds more tension? You allow that to relax. As you’re going down the arms, out to the fingers, or you can start with the fingers and go back up the other way. And start with the toes, go up the body. And you find that in some spots the left side has more tension than the right side, and they move a little bit out. The right side has more tension than the left. Think of them coming back into balance. As you simply release the tightness in the muscles, the energy will flow on its own. Breath energy is not something you can push. You have to think of opening channels. And then once the channels are open, the breath will flow on its own. If you push, you’re starting to actually push the blood around in your body. And that can sometimes get stuck up in the head and give you a headache, or get centered in the chest. You have this feeling of heaviness in the chest. When that happens, think of opening up the channels to let these things out. If there’s too much energy in the head, think of it going out the eyes, or down the front of the throat, down into the chest. If there’s too much in the chest, think of it spreading out the arms. But as for the breath energy, it’ll flow in and out. You are relaxed in a balanced way, relaxed in a way that your posture is good and balanced. The more easily the breath will flow, then the more pleasant it will be to stay here. So these different activities—and that’s what the aggregates are, they are activities—help one another along. You look for a perception that helps with the sensation of the breathing. Think of it as a feeling of pleasure. And then you observe. How are things going? Does the perception need to be changed? Does the point of focus need to be changed? Do you have to work through the body again to release patterns of tension? That’s the work of what the Buddha calls “directed thought and evaluation.” What’s your kind of fabrication? So you’re bringing these aggregates together here because you want to observe them. As the Buddha said, if you cling to them, they cause suffering. But if you turn them in the path, they can lead to the end of suffering. And you’ve got to understand them. And the best way to understand them is to bring them together right here. It’s in this way that the concentration is a sense of oneness. It’ll get deeper as you drop your analysis of what’s going on. There comes a point where the breath is flowing fine, and you just can’t improve it in any way. So ask yourself, “Can I just settle down with this and just be there with the breath, surrounded by the breath?” There’ll be a sense of oneness with the breath. Your intention to stay will still be a fabrication, but it’s a lot more subtle than that. It’s a lot more subtle than the analysis you were doing before. But all these activities are gathered around one. You’ve got one topic, one gathering point, one meeting place where they come together. So if the mind’s going to do any thinking, have it think about the breath. If it’s going to drop the thinking, okay, that’s fine too. Just be with the sensation of the breath. Be with the perception of the breath. As long as these activities don’t separate from one another. In other words, you don’t start going after perceptions of what you want to eat tomorrow, what you want to fix tomorrow, or where you came from today, or what’s happening back home. Don’t let your perceptions pull you away. You’ve got to stay right here. As Ajahn Fung used to say, “Pretend that you’ve died. The affairs out there don’t mean anything anymore.” There’s a sense of freedom, a sense of release, that can come even with that thought. For the time being, you don’t have any responsibilities outside. This is your one responsibility, getting all these activities of the mind to work together. So that you’re going to have a sense of being nourished by the concentration. And so you can begin to understand the mind. The nourishment there is good because otherwise, if you’re not feeling nourished by how things are going inside, you’re going to go looking out for things to feed on outside. And the understanding is helpful when you see, “Okay, this is how the mind puts things together.” And so when it starts putting unskillful thoughts together, you can start taking it apart in these terms. Say you’re in a bad mood. Ask yourself, “How are you breathing? What are the perceptions you’re holding?” What are you talking to yourself about? What is a physical feeling in the body? Can you change those things? And if you’ve been practicing with the breath, you start with the breath. Rather than just stewing around in your moods or telling yourself, “Well, whatever my mood is, that must be what I really feel, so I’ve got to get in touch with my real feelings.” We’ve been in touch with our real feelings for a long time. And for the most part, it doesn’t go anywhere. But here we can do something new. We don’t have to be trapped by our feelings, trapped by our emotions, trapped by our thoughts. We can use our understanding of these different processes going on to make something better. This is a path that goes someplace away from suffering, away from hunger, away from the mind’s unnecessary burdens. And you find that when the unnecessary burdens are gone, there’s nothing to weigh down the mind. So look at the breath and the perception that holds you with the breath, and the feeling of pleasure that comes from that as your path that’s taking you someplace. So fashion it well.

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