Calming Breath Energies

June 22, 2017

Two of the steps in the Buddha’s explanation of breath meditation are breathing in and out, aware of the entire body, and then draining yourself to breathe in and out, calming bodily fabrication. There’s a lot going on in those two steps. You’re getting yourself more and more acquainted with what the body feels like from within. As you try to fully inhabit it, from the head down to the tips of the fingers, down to the tips of the toes, and everything in between. For some of us, that’s unexplored territory. Our awareness of the body tends to be focused into just a few spots. We’re aware of the energies in the body usually only when they’re very strong. And often, when the energies are strong, they’re accompanied by strong emotions. And the way we deal with our emotions will have an impact on how we deal with the energies in the body. That’ll be our repertoire, our range of approaches. Usually there are two. Either you bottle things up or you let them out. Here we’re trying to learn something new, a new way of living with the energies in the body that brings them into balance. And although the practice aims at calming bodily fabrication, you’ll find that things will be energized sometimes in the process of getting into the body. It can do with all the little energy flows that start springing up. The main direction is towards calming, balance. So on the one hand, it involves learning how to bring things into balance inside. But at the same time, it also involves opening things up in new ways. As I was saying this afternoon, excess energy in the body should be allowed to go out. Not in your actions, but just think of it going out the body. The palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. Sometimes you can think of it going out your eyes. And if you find that you have a tendency to bottle things up, you have to watch out for the fact that when patterns of tension get released in one part of the body, they may run into getting bottled up in another part. So pace them down. This is why Chandri recommends going through the whole body. He mentions it only once, but you can go through the body many, many times. It’s like making sure that all the pipes in the house, all your plumbing, is unblocked so that pressure building up in one area has a place to be released and doesn’t build up in another area and doesn’t get blocked someplace else. Many, many times, releasing patterns of tension. And if you find yourself riding a wave of energy, allow it to subside. Sometimes we sit down to meditate hoping that something strange will happen, something new and unexpected. And subconsciously we encourage strange things to happen. We think that they’re a sign of something. The real sign we’re trying to go for here, though, is getting the mind perfectly in balance so that everything feels smoothed out inside and clean inside, undisturbed inside. So allow things to open up. Think of whatever channels there may be in the body. And John Lee mentions a few of them. You might forge a few of your own. John Foon talked about a channel going down from the middle of the head down to the center of the body. He said, “Imagine the energy as you breathe in going from all the areas of the skin into that center line, and then from that center line going out all the areas of the skin.” He also talked about thinking of the breath in the bones. Think of the breath going down the spine. If you have headaches—and this is probably where he learned this, he tended to have bad headaches when he was young—think of it going down the spine and then out the base of the spine, down into the ground. Whatever you find allows the excess energy to get grounded, to get released. And in the beginning, in opening up like this, you’ll find yourself feeling a little bit more exposed. It’s a phase you have to go through in order to protect yourself. As you’re going through that phase, you have to think not only about the energies in the body, but also your attitude toward energies outside, the energies of other people. Sometimes when we’re listening to other people’s problems, we have this subconscious tendency to want to bring in their energy. That’s a way of showing sympathy. But that doesn’t help those other people at all. It can also harm you. So think of their energy as their energy, your energy as yours. Try to inhabit the body as fully as you can. When things get balanced in the body, then in John Lee’s words, all the breath energies get coordinated. They create a kind of energy force field around you that enables you to be with other people but not soak up their energy. It’s like the current running through a wire, building up an electromagnetic force around the wire. Think of that energy as a cocoon around you, protecting you. Because we’re going to get here in the present moment so we can see things clearly. Not so that we can have strong energy experiences. The strong experiences are like a scale swinging back and forth before it reaches balance. But we’re aiming for the balance. Because when things get finally balanced in the body, that’s when you can see the mind a lot more clearly. And that’s what we’re after. But it involves working through the energies of the body first so that everything can get sorted out. So it becomes your home, a place where you feel like you belong and you feel at ease. You can tap into some energy when you feel tired, but also know how to release it when it gets excessive. These different flows in the body get more and more gentle, more and more refined. That’s when you begin to see the currents of the mind. When the mind goes out after something, there actually will be a sense that something is flowing out of the mind. The Ajahn Santala talks about this a lot, the currents of the mind that head out in different directions. And when issues in the body are calm, you can see this, and there’s a definite feeling of a flow. And you ask yourself, “Where are you going? What are you looking for? Are you looking for trouble?” What’s pushing that flow? Is it greed, aversion, delusion, discernment? I mean, there are good flows and there are bad flows. But when things in the body are quiet, you can see them a lot more clearly and then deal with them a lot more effectively. And part of it is an energetic issue. Things begin to stir a little bit inside and then they go flowing out. A lot of it has to do, though, with your understanding of things. The way you perceive things. This is why meditation is not just a matter of stilling the mind. But it’s also a matter of applying the Buddhist analysis of why we suffer. It’s the mind heading out, but it’s heading out of ignorance. It has all kinds of strange attitudes about what’s going on. This is why we read the Dhamma, listen to the Dhamma, to get some new ideas about what’s worth taking an interest in and what’s not. That’s what appropriate attention is all about. When I was first studying with the Chan Fuang, I’d have these strange experiences in the meditation. I was all excited about them, and he would hardly be interested at all. At first I was frustrated, because it felt like it was thwarting me. But then I began to realize that that’s not what we’re here for. We’re here to get the mind still so we can see itself. We’re here to gain some insight into attitudes by which you are causing yourself unnecessary suffering. Beliefs you have about how you relate to yourself, how you relate to other people. The mind is related to the body. Those are things you have to straighten out so that you’re causing less suffering for yourself, less suffering for the people around you. And that understanding will also have an impact on your energetic sense of the body. It’s not that the energy comes first and words are applied only later. Sometimes the words are there first and then there’s going to be a reaction inside. So when you see yourself getting worked up over an issue, you have to step back and ask, “Okay, what am I clinging to? Where am I holding on to? What perceptions am I holding on to?” You’ve got to change those perceptions. As long as you’re going to hold on to a perception, hold on to one that’s good, that’s actually helpful. The path is not one of obliterating perceptions. It’s learning to use your perceptions wisely, the labels you apply to things, the values you give to things. And it’s an issue of appropriate attention. What things are worthy of your attention and what things are not. As the Buddha said, appropriate attention is the primary internal quality that’s going to work toward your awakening. And it starts with learning how to figure out which energies in the body are worth encouraging and which ones are not. Then you become more aware of the whole body and the different energy flows that happen. And John Lee talks about the ones that spin around in place, the ones that come in and go out, the ones that move from one part of the body to another. He talks about the energy going down the spine, the energy coming up the spine. Which ones are helpful right now to bring things into balance? When you get a sense of which ones to focus on and which ones to ignore, that’ll help you with other issues that come up. Because you realize you’ve got the choice. The way you represent the body to yourself is very closely related to the way you represent the world to yourself, your position in the world. And simply realizing you have the choice, you can change your perceptions, can in and of itself be very liberating. But always keep in mind, we’re here to find balance because it’s in balance that you can see clearly. You can’t force your way into nirvana. As Ajaan Fuang once said, “If we could force our way into nirvana, we would have gone there by now.” So what do we have to do? Push our way. But here’s something where you have to step back and look more carefully. Figure out what’s going to bring things into balance here. Because it’s when things are in balance, that’s when they open up. This is what the middle way is all about, the discernment that comes from not going after extremes. We’re trying to find the point of just right. Just right with the energies in the body, just right with the thoughts in the mind. Where you can get a sense that you really belong here in your body. Then it becomes an easy place to stay.

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