Perfect Breathing Isn’t the Goal

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We focus on the breath. We work with the breath to give the mind a good place to settle down. If you want to be here for a long time, there has to be a sense of well-being. As you try to create that by focusing on the breath, by adjusting the way you breathe, by adjusting your perceptions of the breath, and adjusting the ways you talk to yourself about the breath. You can try different rhythms of breathing. You can try different images in the mind of how the breath comes into the body, how it goes out, and when it runs through the body, where it runs, what direction it runs. Sometimes it’s good to think of the breath going down the spine as you breathe in. Other times it’s good to think of it going up. And this is something you can explore on your own. When Ajahn Foon would teach breath meditation, he’d give his students Ajahn Lee’s Method Two, which talks about breathing in, breathing out, starting at the back of the neck, breathing in from the back, going down the spine, going through the shoulders and the arms, in the middle of the chest, going down through the intestines. But he certainly wouldn’t limit his discussions of what you can do with the breath to those options. Sometimes you talk about thinking of the breath going down the spine, and instead of going down the legs, you think of it going down into the ground. So think of your spinal column being rooted down in the ground. What does that do to the way you breathe? Sometimes you notice, as you make a survey of the body, that some parts of the body seem to be missing, or they’re not where they should be. Your shoulder may be someplace not where your shoulder is, between your neck and your arm. Notice that. And see what would allow the breath to go through whatever blockage there is there. Lots of different things are going to be happening. Ajahn Lee talks about the breath energies not only in the body, but running just outside the body, like a cocoon. You can focus on those. The purpose is to give the mind a good place to settle down. And the Buddha talks about working with the breath. He doesn’t talk about breath per se, but he talks about developing a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, refreshment in the body through the way you breathe. And then allowing that to spread. The image he gives is of a bathman. Back in those days they didn’t have bars of soap. They had a soap powder that you would mix with water and you’d create a kind of dough, which then you’d rub over your body. You’d have to knead the water into the soap powder. You can think of someone kneading water into the dough for bread. It gives you an idea of working the feelings of pleasure, the feelings of fullness, through the different blockages in the body, around the blockages, until everything connects. That’s called a pleasant abiding. It’s not called awakening. It’s not called freedom from clinging. This is an important point. Because sometimes we work with the breath and we think that if I got perfect breath throughout the body there would be a sign that I have no clinging in my mind. But that’s not the case. There are cases when there’s mental clinging and there is a tensing up in different parts of the body. But there are lots of ways that a mind can cling that don’t have any effect on the breath at all. You can have perfectly good breath, smooth breath, wide open breath, well-connected breath. There can still be defilements in the mind. So you have to remember we’re here not to create perfect breathing. We’re here to breathe well enough so the mind can feel comfortable with the breath and be willing to settle down. And it’s not disturbed by the breath. It’s good to get the breath in. It’s as subtle as possible. It’s like tuning in to a radio station. If the radio is not well tuned, there’s going to be a lot of static. You can’t clearly hear what’s being said or whatever music is being played. But the more precisely you are tuned in, then the less static there is, the more you can hear. The less disturbance there is from the breath in, the more you can watch the mind. So we’re finding a place where we can do the work. But the real work is in the mind. Sometimes you find as you breathe through a pattern of tension in the body, something from a childhood memory comes through. You realize you’ve been tensing that particular muscle since who knows how long. That’s symptom management. You know, when doctors treat an illness, sometimes they can’t attack the cause right away because the patient is in so much pain. People like to fly their planes in nice quiet places. It reminds me of the time when I was staying on the hill. One time I was sitting, I was all alone on the hill. It was very quiet. One day a family from Bangkok came. They were commenting on how quiet it was. And then they pulled out their boombox and turned it on. So you could hear their boombox without any other interference. So there are cases when a patient is in so much pain that you have to treat the pain first before you can treat the actual cause of the disease. Otherwise the patient may be thrashing around so much that you can’t do anything else. And it’s the same with working with the breath. We’re working with the symptoms, we’re not working with the cause. After all, the cause is in the mind. Mano buma gamadhamo mano cetah manomiya. All phenomena have the mind as their forerunner. They’re excelled by the mind. They’re made by the mind. So we’re here to look into the mind. We’re working with the breath for the purpose of getting to the mind. We can learn some interesting things about the breath, how it’s helpful, not only to create a sense of ease while you’re sitting and meditating, but also while you’re doing walking meditation. When you’re sick, it’s good to be able to know how to deal with the breath energies in a way that helps deal with the pain of the illness. And sometimes actually there are illnesses that are caused by tension in the body. You can relieve that. But those are side effects. And John Lee compares them to plants growing on the edge of a path that you followed, walking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You notice that some of the plants are edible. Some of the plants can be used as medicine. You’re not there for the plants, you’re there to follow the path. But there’s no harm in gathering up the plants and eating them along the way. But you have to realize the real causes are inside, the causes of your suffering. And they may not manifest themselves in any physical symptom. On the other hand, you can have physical symptoms of tension, tightness, illness, but it may not be related to what’s going on in your mind right now. After all, the Buddha himself, after his awakening, still would get sick. His breath wasn’t perfect all the time. So we work with the breath just enough to get the mind to settle down. If it feels good enough to stay, you can put down your directed thought and evaluation and just be there as best you can. Allow the breath to get more and more still as your mind gets more and more still. And when subtle movements come up, then you can see them. Those are the things we’re after. When something arises in the mind, what arises with it? What’s its origination? What cause is there in the mind itself that causes these things to arise? And what goes away? What causes that particular defilement to go away? What’s the allure? You may have associations of that particular defilement that make it appealing. Or there may be defilements that you don’t like, but you still go for them. They’re connected to something else that you like. You have to track that down. Because if you don’t track that down, there’s no way you can contemplate the drawbacks effectively enough to get rid of your attachment. If you haven’t figured out exactly what it is that the appeal is, you can think of things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and all the other things that the Buddha recommends as perceptions for dealing with attachments. And you’ll still hold on. Because you’re not scratching for another right place where it itches. So always keep this in mind. The same principle applies to figuring out where you want to be, and blaming your environment on how it’s difficult to practice. Some environments are very loud and very disturbing. You want to get away from those. But there are others that it’s nice and quiet and you still get upset. But the problem is not with the environment. The problem is inside. And that’s where you’ve got to look. The Buddha makes a comparison with a dog that has mange. It lies down next to a bush and it has mange. It blames the bush. It lies down next to a wall. It still blames the wall. But it’s the mange that’s the problem. So remember, we’re here to look for the causes of our suffering inside. That’s where the problem is. That’s where the solution is going to be. Get used to looking at your own mind. You’re going to see a lot of things you don’t like. And there is that tendency to deflect your attention from those things. But those are precisely the things you’ve got to understand. The Buddha gives you that five step process. Look for the origination, look for the passing away, look for the allure, look for the drawbacks. Compare the drawbacks with the allure. And when you get things right, the dispassion that comes in will help you to escape. That’s the cure. So remember, that’s where our efforts are focused. Don’t get waylaid someplace else.

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