Exploring the Breath

September 4, 2024

Those reflections that we chant in the evening before the meditation are designed to get you in the right mood to practice. When a John Sowell was alive, those are the ones that he would often choose. The contemplation of the body, that’s to cut through any fantasies you might have in thinking thoughts of sensuality. Whatever fantasies you might have come down to this body made out of what? Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh. Nothing particularly attractive when you think about it part by part. Of course we don’t like to think of it part by part, or there are certain parts we think about and other parts we don’t. But if you want to be fair, you’ve got to think about the whole thing. Then there’s reflection on aging, illness, and death. Whatever pleasures you go for in the world, you’re going to be separated from them. Even this body is going to leave you. And what are you going to have left? Your actions. And particularly, where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. So you have to work on your mind. In case the reflections get you depressed, the Buddha reminds you that we actually are here for the sake of happiness. May I be happy, may all beings be happy. We want happiness that doesn’t conflict with other people’s true happiness. In other words, we want to be responsible about how we look for happiness. As the Buddha noted before he gained awakening, before he left home, he looked at the world, and everywhere you look, somebody’s laid claim to it. If you want to get happiness out of things like that, you’re going to have to fight people off. So the best thing to do is look inside. He realized if you wanted to really look inside, you had to find a place where you could be secluded from other people’s demands, other people’s concerns. And focus on what he had going in his mind right now. So when you reflect on these things, they direct you inside. The Buddha talks about two ways of getting the mind to settle down. One is to think of all the things that you might possibly want to think about, and then think about why you really don’t want to think about them. There’s nothing left but to settle down with the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves. The other, of course, is to give yourself something to think about, specifically right here. And he starts with the breath. And of all of his meditation instructions, his breath meditation instructions are the most detailed. They’re repeated most often through the Canon. The interesting thing about them, of course, is that despite the details, there’s still a lot that you have to explore on your own. They simply raise questions. The Buddha says to breathe in and out, short breathing, long breathing. And just discern these things. What does it mean to discern? The Buddha said if your discernment is really penetrative, you get to see what causes things, which things are skillful and which things are not. So you can ask yourself, long breathing, short breathing, which is better right now? Experiment. You try. Read the results. And of course, you’re not limited to long and short. Fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. One of the instructions that’s missing in the breath meditation instructions is his recommendation to energize the body. You see that in other places. Because you’re going to be calming things down. And if you start from a fairly sluggish mind state or sluggish state in the body, and you calm it down, you just go to sleep. You get into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration. Everything’s very quiet, kind of blurry. You can’t really say that you’re alert. You can’t really say that you’re not alert. You don’t want that. So it’s good to energize yourself first. Ajaan Lee recommends some good long breathing to begin with. And you gradually let it calm down. But you can explore for yourself what kind of breathing, what rhythm of breathing gives you some energy. And then you can also explore it when you’ve had enough, when you do want to calm things down. In the meantime, he says, try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in. This is where it’s going to be up to your powers of observation to notice how the in and out breath relates to the breath sensations in the different parts of the body. There are many different levels of subtlety. And as you get more sensitive to the body, you begin to realize that there are places where you’ve been carrying tension around. It may have been for a long time. It’s not uncommon that you find a tense part in the body and you allow it to relax, relax, relax. And then when it finally sort of breaks through, you have an image, a memory of pointing to your childhood maybe, when you had an injury there. And you’ve been carrying that tension around ever since. Working with energy knots can be one of the more fascinating stages in the breath meditation. And there are lots of different ways of doing it. In some cases, you focus right in. If breath energy were to go through this tight spot, where would it go? What direction would it come from? What would be the path it would take through? Because after all, it’s a knot. It’s not straightforward. It might curl around for a while, come up for a while, then go down. Check it out. Other times, you don’t want to scatter in it. There are parts of the body that are really resistant to any kind of interest you might show in them. There may be parts of your own mind that are very sensitive, very wary. And they’re not about to open up easily. They’re like wild animals. If you stare at them, they run away, close up. So you have to glance off to the side a bit and give them some reason to want to open up. In other words, you start treating other areas around them gently. Or maybe not so close to them, some other part of the body entirely. If you find that there are energy knots in your torso, focus on your feet, focus out on your hands, and gradually work in from those parts, releasing any tension, releasing any tightness, opening up the channels. And be very patient. Someone once asked Ajahn Mahaprabhu, “What’s the easy way to develop patience?” He says, “One is putting aside the question of easy.” Patience doesn’t mean you don’t care, or you don’t do anything. You do things, but you are very careful not to push things too hard. So see what your body responds to. This is an area that you have to explore. And you have to use your imagination. But it’s helpful to learn from the imagination of others. You can read John Lee’s descriptions. There’s something about John Foong’s in the book Awareness Itself. John Foong was talking about imagining or visualizing a line running down the middle of your body, from the crown of the head down to the base of your spine. As you breathe in, the breath energy comes into that line from all directions. As you breathe out, it goes out in all directions. That’s an image you can hold in mind. The fact that you’re aware of a line rather than just a spot may be one way of getting the mind to really settle down. Because for some of us, it’s as if our minds have two hands. You hold on to one spot, well, that’s one hand is occupied. But then the other hand can reach out and grab anything. But if you’ve got two spots, you try to connect them, then both hands are full. Another image you would use would be breathing down into your bones. He himself had rheumatoid psoriasis, and one of his ways of dealing with it was to breathe into the bone marrow. That gave some relief. It didn’t cure the disease, but it gave him some relief. So if you know that you have a disease in a certain part of the body, you can think about the breath energy going into that part, nourishing that part. Or you can ask yourself, which parts of the body are doing the work when you breathe? And are they getting properly fed? Are they getting their good share of breath energy? Think of the breath going just to them for a while, to nourish them. It’s like making sure that the hard workers get well fed. So there are lots of ways of approaching these energy knots in the body, untangling them. There are cases where you can just think of exploding them. But you have to decide what works for you. And the only way you’re going to decide, of course, is to experiment. This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha leaves so many questions unanswered, even in his most detailed breath instructions. Because there are a lot of variations. Imagine writing breath and meditation instructions for 2,600 years worth of people. The parts of the body, aspects of the body that will be the same for everybody, but there are a lot of things that are going to be different. So you have to experiment to see which of his questions gets the most response out of your body, your experience of your breath, your mind trying to stay with the breath, being at ease with the breath. You start out in a kind of a conversation, and then as things begin to settle down, you don’t have to converse anymore. Just stay together. But in the beginning, there are a lot of questions. And the way to answer them, of course, is to try things out. This way, the knowledge becomes yours. We borrow the Buddha’s insights to begin with. We borrow the insights to the Ajahn’s. But there comes a point when we want to learn how to produce our own insights, so we’re not just a consumer, we’re also a producer. It’s like fixing your own food. Other people may be good at fixing food, but sometimes it’s not quite right for what you need. When you learn how to fix your own food, then you can provide for your real satisfaction.

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