The Joy of Breathing

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Chan Fung used to recommend that you meditate as if you’re playing with meditation. Now, he didn’t mean by that that you play in a desultory way, more like someone who wants to learn how to play a musical instrument or play a sport, who wants to do it well. So on the one hand, there’s a lot of practice, and there can be some drudgery in the repetition. After all, what do you have with the breath if it’s in and it’s out, and then it comes in and goes out again, and then it comes in again and goes out again? And you’re dealing with this again and again and again, and the mind wandering off again and again. But if you approach it as a skill and listen to what the Buddha has to say, you begin to realize that it’s something that you can learn how to enjoy. There’s some drudgery, and there’s some work. The work can be enjoyable. There’s a joy in the effort. As the Buddha said to Arjuna, “When you realize that you’ve done something that hasn’t harmed anybody, take joy in that fact and continue training.” So there’s in and of itself a certain amount of joy. You’re not doing anything unskillful. You’re not doing anything harmful. Then he says there’s the pleasure and rapture that can come from seclusion. The seclusion here means that you’re secluded from your unskillful thinking. That may take some time. But in the meantime, you can work with the breath. He talks about breathing in a way that’s pleasurable, breathing in a way that even gives rise to a rapture, a sense of fullness, a sense of energy. He doesn’t explain how to do that, but John Lee has a lot of good recommendations, working with the breath energies in the body. When I was in Singapore a couple months ago, there were some people who belonged to another school of concentration practice who object to a John Lee’s method, saying, “The Buddha never said anything about breath energies.” Well, there’s a lot the Buddha doesn’t say. He says, “Breathe in a way that’s comfortable.” How do you do that? He doesn’t say. You have to figure that out. When there’s a sense of comfort, there’s a sense of ease and rapture. Then he says, “Allow that to permeate through the body.” Again, he doesn’t say how you do that. John Lee’s recommendations of working with the breath energy help to fill in that gap. So they’re not in any way counter to what the Buddha said. They simply give you some ideas of how to implement the Buddha’s teachings in a way that fits you and you can find enjoyable. Learning how to enjoy the breath requires that you get very sensitive to the way the breathing feels throughout the body. For some of us, this is hard. We think of the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the lungs. Our mental picture of breathing is like a bellows. You expand and contract. The air comes in, the air goes out, and that’s pretty much it. But you have to learn how to be sensitive to the sensation of breathing. You realize it’s not just in the lungs or around the nose. There’s an energy that expands and an energy that contracts the body, which allows the air to come in. And do you enjoy that energy? It’s something that can be enjoyed. It means getting out of your head and allowing your awareness to melt down into the body. So you’re sensitive to how the hands feel, sensitive to how your feet feel, every part of the body. Then ask yourself, “What would feel really good in those parts of the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out?” And use some ingenuity. Psychologists who have done research into imagination say there are basically four steps to imagination. One is creating an image in your mind. The second is learning how to maintain that image. The third is playing around with the image. And then the fourth is judging how well you’ve done it. If the playing around, if you’ve made changes in the image, if you’ve improved it or made it worse, you use your faculties of judgment to decide. And you keep playing around like that. This is where the play comes in, and the meditation as well. You hold the image of the breath in the mind and then you sense the breath. First you create the image and then you maintain it. And then you explore how well does this image fit with the way you actually feel the breathing in the body. And what are you telling yourself about the breath, about long breathing, short breathing? How much is just right? At what point can you tell that the breath has gone out long enough and should start coming in? One way is to just keep on breathing in and out. Breathing out, out, out, out, until the body says, “Got to breathe in. Okay, now you know you’ve got to breathe in.” But there are other times when all you want to do is breathe out just a little bit and breathe in a lot more. But you can ask yourself, “How do you know?” How do things feel? Try to be sensitive. Resensitize yourself to the body. We in the West tend to be in our heads a lot. And to stay in your head, you’ve got to desensitize yourself to the body in a lot of ways so you can stay in your thought worlds. Now you want to get out of those thought worlds and back into the body. In regard to what you may have heard, Theravada speaks about the body being filled with all kinds of unclean things, and it does say that. But it also says you get in touch with the body and it can be a source of rapture. You’ve got the potential right here. So the more sensitive you can make yourself to the way the breathing feels, the more you can become a connoisseur of how the breathing feels. Then you can start making those adjustments and seeing if it makes the body more pleasant or less. And keep playing around. The Jhanli calls this a factor of right effort. If things don’t go well, you just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. But what he doesn’t say is you can learn how to enjoy this, see it as something you can play with. You can play with your perceptions, you can play with your sensations in the body, if you allow yourself to get sensitive to them. So think of the breath bathing you in every direction. You’re in the midst of this process of energy flowing around you. Hold that image in mind. Then you can judge where things are flowing well, where they’re not flowing well, where they’re tense, where they’re tight. Any tension or tightness, think of relaxing, relaxing, relaxing. So see this as an opportunity to develop a skill, a skill where you can play with your perception, where you can taste the results, enjoy the results. Like listening to music, playing music. You get to listen to it at the same time you play. In the beginning it’s awkward. You bang around on the piano, you strum the guitar, and it doesn’t make a particularly pleasant noise. But you can play around. You can try different things. Then you find things that do sound good. And then you realize, well, maybe it’s worth investing some time in improving your technique. And you do it not out of a sense of obligation, but simply because you know it’s going to sound better. It’s the same with the breath. We work with the breath not because we’re obligated to work with the breath, but because it should make it more comfortable. So learn to listen to your breath the same way you would listen to a musical instrument. And allow your imagination of what you can do with the breath to expand. Now you’re beginning to realize there’s a lot to explore here, and it becomes your exploration. You begin to spread that sense of feeling good throughout the body, not because the Buddha told you to, but because it feels really nice. It’s a good place to be. It’s a good exercise to be engaged in. So even though we have to put up with some awkward meditations in the beginning, we begin to realize, after a while, that there is a skill that you develop here. It’s not totally hit or miss. It’s that if you pay attention and get as sensitive as you can to what’s going on, even down into your fingers, into your wrists, into your arms, down in your legs, down into different parts of your torso, around the eyes, around the ears, down the spine, you find that you can become a connoisseur of the breath. And you begin to appreciate when it’s flowing well, when it’s not flowing well. And concentration will come without you having to call it. I was reading a weird passage recently where someone was saying that when you practice jhana, you get the mind in a nice place and then you just say, “May the jhana factors appear.” Well, they don’t appear that way. In fact, you don’t even have to think about jhana in order to get the mind into jhana. You think about the breath, and you play with the breath. And the factors come without you having to name them or call them. Because, after all, the factors that the Buddha talks about in the first jhana are direct to thought and evaluation. Well, you’re already doing that to something. It may not be the breath. But you just take that activity and you apply it to the breath. Then you just focus it. Try to stay with this one topic. And as you get more sensitive, then the pleasure and the rapture appear. Again, without you having to think about them. Simply that you’re getting absorbed in this process of exploring these sensations in the body that you may have been ignoring for years. And now you begin to realize that if you pay them careful attention, they can reward you. So the pleasure is both a sensation of comfortable breath energy and a sense that you’re mastering a skill. So there’s both the pleasure of consumption and the pleasure of production, which helps to make the pleasure and well-being and even the rapture concentration something that’s all around.

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