Ins & Outs of the Breath

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We establish mindfulness to get the mind into concentration. As the Buddha said, the four establishings of mindfulness are the theme of right concentration. Which means even though we want to get the mind into jhana, we can’t be thinking jhana as we practice. We focus our attention on one of the themes of mindfulness—the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities, preferably the body. As the Buddha said, when you focus on the breath, it takes care of all four of the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness. The breath, of course, is body. The feelings of comfort or discomfort that arise as you try to settle on the breath. Those are feelings. The state of mind is either concentrated or not. That’s mind. As you try to get the mind to settle down with the breath so that both your awareness and a comfortable sensation fill the body, it’s going to require that you abandon the hindrances and develop the factors for awakening. And so as you analyze the problem, if there’s something getting in the way, is it a hindrance or is it simply a lack of one of the factors of awakening? That’s the fourth frame of reference. So they all gather around right here. So even though jhana is the object of meditation in the sense that it’s one of the purposes of establishing mindfulness, it’s not the object that you focus on. In other words, maybe object as purpose, but object as theme is the breath. And you have to get interested in the breath in order to stay here. And the Buddha talks about succeeding in the meditation. Four qualities are desire, persistence, intent or interest, and then using your powers of analysis. So desire, persistence, desire, you have to want to be with the breath, and intent, you have to see that it’s something worth really paying careful attention to. Because on its own, it just seems to go in and out. In fact, someone once complained to a jhanli, “How can you find any discernment just watching the breath? All it has is in and out, in and out.” And as a jhanli responded, “If that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.” The implication being that there’s a lot more to see. For instance, when the Buddha explains his method of breath meditation, it is proactive. You’re not just watching whatever comes up. You’re learning to understand the breath and do things with the breath, develop certain mind states through the breath. There’s one time when he told the monks to focus on the breath as a topic of meditation. One of the monks who didn’t have that good a reputation said, “Oh, I already do that.” And the Buddha asked him, “What kind of breath meditation do you do?” The monk said, “I put aside thoughts of the past, put aside desires for the future, and I accept with equanimity whatever comes up in the present moment as I breathe in and as I breathe out.” Then the Buddha said, “There is that kind of breath meditation. I don’t say that there’s not, but it’s not the breath meditation that gives the best results.” Then he set out his 16 steps. What’s interesting about the steps is that they involve both an understanding of fabrication and the process of calming. Understanding fabrication is one of the functions of insight. Calming, of course, is one of the functions of tranquility. So as you work with the breath, you get both insight and tranquility at the same time. And they do give insight into that process of fabrication, all three kinds, bodily, verbal, and mental. With bodily, of course, the breath itself is bodily fabrication. As the Buddha said, you start out discerning when the breath is short, when it’s long, and then you train yourself. In fact, all the other steps aren’t training. You make an intention to breathe in a certain way, with a certain attitude, with a certain quality. The first thing is to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, noticing the effect that the breath has on the body. How much breath energy does permeate the body? When the Buddha uses the term bodily fabrication, it has two meanings. One is simply in the sense of bodily karma, the things you do with the body. And the other is the breath. And the connection, of course, is that you can’t move the body without going through the breath. So every time a karma becomes a physical karma, it has to go through the breath. Otherwise, if the breath weren’t there, the body couldn’t move. So it’s through the breath that the body gets orders from the mind. And of course, it’s through the breath that the mind is sensitive to the body. So that in and of itself should be enough to see that the breath is actually something of interest. And then the Buddha says you go into calm bodily fabrication. That means whatever intentional element is there in the breath, you try to calm it down. But when bodily fabrication is totally calm, that’s when you enter in the fourth jhana, i.e., when the breath’s in and out, breathing stops. So that one step, what is described as one step in the fourth step of breath meditation, actually contains an awful lot. As you bring the mind to deeper and deeper states of concentration, the breath gets more and more refined. And here again, this is a spot where it’s useful to think in terms of John Lee’s analysis of the breath energies. Because how can the breath stop unless the needs of the body are met? If you try to stop it simply by holding it, you’re going back to one of the torture practices that the Buddha used before his awakening, which he said did not lead anywhere. So you try to force the breath to stop. What happens is that you allow the body to breathe in such a way that it feels breath energy needs are being met. And the various channels of breath flow in the body are all well connected. So of itself, it stops breathing without your telling it. The mind is very, very quiet. The oxygen needs of the body go way down when the mind is quiet, because the brain is the main user of oxygen. And apparently there is some oxygen exchange at the skin. So whatever is needed, it’s there at the skin. But if you think of the breath channels going to all the pores, that enables the oxygen exchange at the skin to permeate further into the body. So this can be done. And the fact that this can happen should be another reason to realize that breath is an interesting topic. It’s not just in-out. There are many layers of breath energy in the body. And you can relate to them in many ways. Which takes us to the second tetrad, the tetrad that’s associated with feelings. The Buddha says to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure, breathe in and out sensitive to mental provocation, and then to breathe in and out calming mental provocation. So in this case, you breathe in such a way as to give rise to feelings of refreshment. And then refresh, feelings of ease. And these feelings are food for the mind. And as that feeling of rapture and ease develops through the breath, then you spread it through the body. This is one of the ways you get the breath energies to connect. And as they’ve done their work, then you can calm things down. Because the term mental fabrication means feeling and perception. Of course, they’re the feelings that you’ve just been working with, trying to develop a feeling of pleasure and spread it around. Then there’s a perception. What kind of perception is calming to the mind? What kind of perception is calming for the breath? And if you think of breath energy permeating the entire body, and that the skin is porous, it makes it a lot easier to sit with the body being very, very still. Not be afraid that you’re going to suffocate. There’s a greater sense of openness, a sense of refreshment. That feels perfectly satisfying. Holding that perception in mind helps to calm things down. A second perception that’s helpful at this point is to think of the breath energy as originating not outside, but inside the body. After all, if it weren’t for the breath energy inside the body, that air outside would not come in. So you can think of the spot, say, around the navel and the chest as the spot where the breath energy originates. From there, it spreads out and ripples throughout the body. And ask yourself, what’s getting in the way of the ripples? What’s getting in the way of the spread of this wave of energy as you breathe in and breathe out? And there’ll be feelings of tension here or there. And you work with those. Perceive them as something that the breath can go right through. Wherever there’s a sense of blockage in the body, it might be with a pain or just a sense of tension or salinity, remind yourself that energy can penetrate between atoms. That’s the perception in mind. And the flow of the breath gets a lot easier, more unrestricted. As things calm down, then it’s easier to focus on the mind. These tetrads are not four steps that have to be followed, say, one through four, and then five through eight. They’re different aspects. That you can switch back and forth among as you’re working with the breath. Sometimes the issue is the mind is not settling down, there’s a problem with the breath energy. So you focus on being sensitive of the whole body, calming bodily fabrication. Sometimes the issue may be a feeling of pain. So learn how to breathe in a comfortable way and then use that sense of comfort to permeate the pain. And then you look at the perceptions you’re holding around the pain. Do you perceive the pain as being connected to other pains in the body? Can you perceive a knife cutting those connections? And when you’ve isolated where the pain is, ask yourself, is the pain the same thing as the body? Or is it something that is at the same place, but it’s on a different level of frequency, you might say. Like the different frequencies of radio waves going through the room right now. Do you perceive the pain as having an intention? Do you perceive it as solid? Do you perceive it as little dots of pain coming and going? When they come, do they come at you or do they disappear as soon as they come? Are they going away as soon as you’re aware of them? Ask these questions, try different perceptions. And you feel you can live with the pain in the body, even though it may stay. Sometimes working with the breath energy actually dissolves the pain away. Other times it doesn’t. But you can live with the pain, because you perceive it in a different way. So those are cases where the problem is with the breath, or the problem is with feelings. Then there are cases where the problem is with the mind. As you look into the mind, it says, “Breathe in and out sensitive to the mind.” And then gliding the mind, stilling the mind, releasing the mind, depending on what’s needed. When the mind is feeling sluggish, depressed, drowsy, you’re trying to gladden it. In other words, you’re trying to give it energy, either by the way you breathe or by the way you think. You may switch to another topic for a while to bring a little bit of gladness into the mind. Goodwill may gladden it, reflecting on your own generosity, reflecting on your own virtue. That you are a person who has some goodness to yourself. As that alternative object gladdens the mind, then you begin to notice, when the mind feels gladdened like this, how is the breath? The breath is calmed down, the breath feels more nourishing as you’re thinking these gladdening thoughts. Then you go back to the breath as your object. Or the mind is scattered all over the place, instead of gladdening it, you’re trying to steady it. One good contemplation to steady it is the contemplation of death. Could happen at any time. Are you ready to go? The answer usually is no. Okay, how do you get ready? You’ve got to get your mind in shape. In other words, you talk yourself into wanting to settle down, letting go of whatever it is that’s distracted the mind. As you get your priorities straight, you’re upset by some issue at work, you don’t want to die with that issue in your mind. You’re upset with some political issue, upset with some issue at home, that’s not what you want to have in your mind as you die. Thinking about death puts things into perspective, and when things are in perspective and the mind is more willing to settle down with the breath, you go back to the breath. The third project, releasing the mind, is basically if the mind is being trapped by sensual thoughts, you do what you can to release it from those thoughts. Thinking of the drawbacks of sensuality, thinking of the drawbacks of lust, and thinking about the object of your sensuality, how it’s really not worth getting all worked up about. And here you can see, you really would rather settle down with the breath. That way you come back. And then as you work with the breath, the mind feels trapped by all of its thinking and direct thought and evaluation. Can you just be with the breath? Drop that thinking and feel comfortable and at ease with the breath. If you can’t, remind yourself, okay, a certain amount of thinking and evaluation is needed to get everything together. When the breath energy feels wholesome, nourishing, then you can say, well, now I can settle down. I don’t have to think so much. And that way you release the mind from its direct thought and evaluation. And so on through the various levels of jhana. So there you are with the three component factors of concentration. The body, i.e., the breath, the feeling, the pleasure, the awareness. So you’ve got the breath filling the body, the feeling of pleasure filling the body, your awareness filling the body. And you’ve done that by looking at the breath. You’re learning about fabrication. The sixteen steps talk specifically about bodily fabrication and mental fabrication. But the steps themselves are examples of verbal fabrication. Talk to yourself, I will now breathe in a way that’s more rapturous. I will try to protect that. I’ll try to breathe in a way that’s sensitive to pleasure. I will now breathe in a way calming fabrication. So you’ve got all three forms of fabrication here. The fabrications that you use to fabricate issues outside the way you understand the world around you. You’re getting hands-on experience with using these fabrications in a skillful way. All this when focusing on the breath. And as you get better at releasing things in the mind, that takes you to the final four steps, which start out with being sensitive to inconstancy. Of course, what that means is you see things coming and going. And not just coming and going, you see how they originate. When they come, why do they come? When they go, why do they go? And it follows with those other steps, seeing the allure. When they come, why do you want to go with them? When you do go with them, what are the drawbacks? When you contemplate their comings and goings in this way. It can give rise to a sense of dispassion, which is the next step in that tetrad. Breathing in and out sensitive to dispassion. When there’s dispassion for these processes of fabrication, they stop. Because they’re driven by passion. Remember, everything is rooted in desire. All the activities by which we put together the potentials from the past and turn them into present experience. All these are driven by desire. When the desire goes, then all the processes stop. When the processes stop, then you can let go of everything. Even the analysis that allows you to let go, you let go of that too. That can take you all the way to nirvana. If you look at it in the right way, understand it in the right way, and take an interest. Even though you’re just with the breath, there’s an awful lot to see here. It’s similar to a teaching that they have in Zen. There’s a Zen master, Dogen, who taught what he called “just sitting.” But just sitting didn’t mean you just sat there and did nothing. You ask questions. What is it to sit here? Is the body sitting in the center? Is the mind sitting in the body? Who’s doing the sitting? Who’s asking the questions? In other words, you bring yourself fully right here and you ask yourself lots of questions. Ask yourself lots of questions about what’s going on. The Buddha gives you the right questions to ask about fabrication, bodily, verbal, mental. What’s fabricated in the present moment? And learning how to calm those fabrications. You can bring the mind to a sense of oneness, clarity. That allows you to let go. So the breath is not just in and out. It has lots of ins and outs. As John Lee said, it’s like a mirror for the mind. So you polish the mirror so you can see the mind more clearly. Because all these fabrications come together right here. It’s like when you do a survey of the animals in a savanna. You don’t go running all around the savanna trying to chase the animals, because they’ll run away from you. But if you go to the waterhole, in the course of the day, all the animals there are going to have to come to the waterhole. That’s when you get to see them. The breath provides a place just like that. It’s the waterhole. It’s the waterhole for all the fabrications in the mind. So when you focus here, take an interest here, there’s a lot to see. Now thinking about that should give you more interest in staying with the breath, forgetting about jhana. The jhana will take care of itself. If you really explore what’s involved in sitting here, breathing in and out.

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