Breath as Ally

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We focus on the breath to give the mind a good place to settle down and gather its strength. So it’s important that we understand the breath, who it is we’re taking as our ally. In Chantali’s teachings on using breath energies, it helps to solve a problem that’s left by the canon. The Buddha talks about breathing in and out, aware of the entire body, breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, and then allowing that sense of ease and even fullness to spread throughout the entire body. Now, how to do that, he doesn’t say. But in Chantali, if you use the concept of breath energy, it helps. You can think of the energies going through the body, and these are mentioned in the canon. Aspects of the wind element that flow along all the different organs of the body. If you notice how this is related to the in-and-out breath, you can use that, as he says, as a solvent. To get those feelings of well-being, feelings of ease, feelings of rapture, to permeate through the body. If there are pains in the body, you can think of the ease going through the pains. It helps loosen up a lot of the tension around them. It makes the body a much more pleasant place to be. And again, we’re doing this to strengthen the mind. Some people don’t like the idea of meditation. They’re simply finding a nice spot for yourself, as if you didn’t care about anyone else. But it requires strength of mind to deal with the world, to help the world, and learning to get the mind centered like this, and have the body as an ally. It helps give you the strength that you need. Getting used to these different breath energies, or the idea of these breath energies, takes a while for some people. I know for me it wasn’t easy. I liked the idea. I remember the first time I heard about a meditation teacher saying, “Breathe down into your feet.” I thought that was a cool idea. And they did have a concept of the breath flowing through the nerves. But for a long time, it was just a cool idea, trying to actually relate to what was going on in the body, and see it in terms of breath. It took a while. Jon Fuehung made the comment that I was having trouble in the very beginning. He said, “It’s your feeling of the body. What you feel in the body has to go through the breath element.” And that’s a good perception. Keep in mind that your first contact with the body, your first awareness of the body, is through the breath. All too often, we have the concept that we feel the body as a solid, and then we try to pump the breath in. We can do that with the lungs. But then if you try to pump it down your nerves and down your blood vessels, you can actually cause yourself trouble. So think of it as the energy that’s there first—your first contact with the body. Everything else—pain, pleasure, solid, liquid, warmth—have to go through the breath. This means the breath was there first, and there should be nothing that blocks it. That’s a second perception that’s important to hold in mind. All too often, we have a sense of flow in the body, but it’s more than that. It’s the blood flowing through the vessels. Now, blood cannot go through atoms. It can’t go through membranes. It can go through the holes in the membranes, but there are some membranes that are not all that porous. This is why we get feelings of pressure, say when we have pressure headaches, or pressure in the chest, as the blood gets forced against the solid of the blood vessels. So there’s a sense of blockage, a sense of pressure. Remember, that’s not breath. It’s liquid. You want to think of breath as something more refined that can permeate, as Chan-li says, like atoms. It can go through mountains. This also helps to clear up a lot of the emotional residues we have in the body, because we do tend to push the blood around in the body. It depends on what different emotions we’re feeling. Anger will push it in one way, lust will push it someplace else, fear will push it someplace else, and then it gets stuck, say, up in the head or wherever. So you have to think of all the channels opening up, the breath channels flowing through whatever the blockage is. It’s kind of like a magic pass. It can take you through all kinds of blockades, and it can sneak in undetected, sneak through undetected, because it’s just so refined. That’s another useful perception to hold in mind, that even though the breath energy feels blocked, it’s actually the liquid energies in the body that are blocked, and then the breath stagnates. It really does require our perception to help it along. This stage teaches you about the power of perception. This is especially important as you get to know the various resting spots, as the Chan-lis calls them, of the breath. At first you may experience them as intersections in the breath channels of the body. For me, the tip of the sternum seems to be well-connected with everything else. And you can think of that in two ways. One, it’s a distribution network. So as soon as something gets to the central distribution center, then it fans out immediately to all the subsidiaries. So when there’s a healthy breath energy, it fans out. But it’s also an information network. You keep your focus on where you found the main intersections are, and if something goes wrong in any of the breath channels connected with that intersection, you’ll know it at the intersection. That’s the center for your spy network. If there’s something going wrong with the breath in the body, you know it right there. Then you can send out your spies, your scouts, to see where the problem is. The breath keeps you apprised of what’s also going on in the mind. As I said, the breath is the closest of the body’s elements to the mind, to your awareness. If something goes on in the mind, if there’s going to be something unpleasant in the mind, something disturbed in the mind, there’s going to be a disturbance. And you feel it, again, at one of these centers most quickly. This is convenient as you go through the day. Sometimes it’s hard to maintain an awareness of the entire body, but you can maintain an awareness of at least one spot. So choose a central spot to pick up on all the information that you need, the early warning system, and at the same time to distribute good things at the center. When you get a good breath there, you can let it fan out so that we can keep the body nourished as you go through the day. But as you get more familiar with these centers of breath energy, there comes a point in the meditation when you realize that you don’t have to take breath energy in from the outside, that the energy itself emanates from the body. It emanates from these centers. You hold that perception in mind, and then ask yourself, “Where in the body is there any obstruction to the good energy emanating out from those centers?” Allow that to relax. This is the perception that allows you to get into the deeper levels of jhana, even up to the level where the breath stops, because there’s a sense that everything you need is there in the body in terms of breath energy. You’ve opened up all the channels, everything is well-connected, everything is filled with good energy, and the center of the energy is there. As long as you can maintain that perception, you can stay very, very still. Even though it takes a while to get used to the concept of breath energies, once you get the hang of it, you’ll find that it teaches you some important lessons on how to get the mind in sync with the body, and how to sort out the various sensations going on in the body, so that this potential you have in terms of the breath energy can really become your ally and become your source of strength. So that we’re not just sitting here comfortably in the present moment, we’re also building up the strength we need as we deal with issues in the world. Because now we have the breath on our side, and also our energy. And we have an understanding of our powers of perception on our side as well.

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