Properties of Body & Mind

June 26, 2021

When Chan Li talks about the breath, he’s talking about the sense of energy that flows in the body. And it seems that that’s what the Buddha meant by the word “breath” as well, because he classes the breath as a property of the body. If we were talking about the breath, the sensation of the air coming in and out through the nose, that would be a tactile sensation. But he doesn’t talk about it in those terms. He talks about it as a property inherent in the body itself. And when he uses the word “property,” “dhatu,” it’s important to understand that there are a lot of implications to that word. There’s a lot of potential that gets provoked. And there are physical dhatu and there are mental dhatu. The physical ones are earth, water, wind, fire. Sometimes space is added as a fifth. Now, earth and space don’t get provoked, for wind, water, and fire can. On the external level, when there are windstorms, sometimes that’s because the wind property has been provoked. In massive fires, the fire property has been provoked. In floods, the water property has been provoked. But these things can change very radically. Sometimes they’re not provoked. As the texts say, sometimes the wind is so still that even the grass hanging from a grass roof doesn’t stir, or the water in the ocean doesn’t stir. The ocean dries up, so even the tip of your finger is bigger than the amount of water that’s there. Massive fires can burn, and then they come to an area where there’s no fuel and they just die out totally. So there’s a huge potential for change in the properties, externally and internally. And as we meditate, we want to take advantage of that. When you sit down to meditate, and there are pains and imbalances among the properties, they don’t have to stay that way. Now, sometimes you’ve set them into motion. You’ve provoked them before you came to the meditation. This is where the mental properties come in. They’re different lists, but the big one is concerned with right and wrong resolve, the property of sensuality, the property of ill will, the property of harmfulness. Sometimes those get provoked in the mind, and they can’t help but have an impact on the body. And when a property gets provoked, sometimes it has to run its course for a while before it can calm down. And we do our best to calm things down inside. And we notice that. Sometimes, if the mind has gotten provoked, to prevent these things from getting into the body, you have to pay careful attention to the breath, because the breath is the medium through which the mind senses the body and through which it tells the body to do certain things. It’s the most responsive of the properties to change, intentional change. This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha focuses attention on it. Of course, the other reason is that when you’re dealing with the breath, the in-and-out breath, there’s no such thing as a past breath or a future breath that you can be with. It’s got to be in the present. But the fact that you can deal with the breath means that you can work with the properties. Try to think of what way of conceiving the breath or conceiving of the flow of the breath through the body. It’s going to be helpful for whatever imbalance you’ve got. And this is going to require patience. But if you can keep your attention focused on what you’re doing and not on the pains, you’ve accomplished an important step right there. The breath element may be flowing through the area where the pain is. So it seems like you can’t distinguish between the two. But there is a difference. Breath is flow, energy. Pain is pain. They’re two separate kinds of things. They may inhabit the same spot, but they’re different. And as long as you keep your attention focused very precisely on the breath, you don’t have to take in the pain. We say “taking in the pain.” The mind has this tendency to communicate from one moment to the next, to the next, where its pains are, as if to warn it, “Watch out. Don’t move this. Don’t deal with this. Don’t interfere with this. Stay away from this.” And those little messages can get more and more oppressive because you tend to tense up, tighten up around the pains as a result, as a way of remembering that they’re there. But you can tell yourself, “Let the pains take care of the pains. You’re going to take care of the medicine that’s going to cure them.” And you focus your attention on that. So as you breathe in, notice how is the breath flowing? If it seems like it’s encountering a pain and can’t flow through the pain, remind yourself that’s a misperception. The breath is prior to the pain. Again, it’s the medium through which you can sense the pains in the body, the pleasures in the body. So think of it going through, through, through, permeating everything. The perception of atoms is useful. Because when you think about it, atoms are tiny, tiny bits of matter in relatively huge pieces of space. So there’s a lot of space for the breath energy to go through. There’s no wall there at the pain. So keep your focus precise and be very clear about what perceptions you’re holding in mind. Because there’s a tendency to fall back to your old perceptions. It’s almost as if they’re sitting around waiting for you, ready to suggest. You say, “Think about the pain in this way. Think about the pain in that way.” It’s like having a council of bad advisors, and you have to learn how not to listen to them. But above all, be patient. Because after all, once you’ve set some of these things in motion, it’s going to take a while. Strong anger can also set the elements out of balance. It’s interesting that when they use the word “provoked” to describe what sets these elements in motion, the word “provoked” also is used for anger, as in English, when someone’s anger is provoked. It’s the same sort of thing. And anger in particular, whether it’s expressed or bottled up, can really wreak havoc on the physical properties of the body. It can say nothing of the other properties of the mind. This is why you can’t nurse anger. And why it’s wise not to express it. As soon as there’s that feeling in the body and the mind, when anger comes up, that tensing up, try to relax it. Because all too often, the only two ways we can think about dealing with it are, one, let it out; two, bottle it up. And neither is very healthy. Bottling up, letting it out, can get your physical elements out of balance. Expressing it, of course, can get you into the area of the karma that’s going to come back at you. So you try to breathe through it. And whatever you’re holding onto that’s making you angry, whatever views you have that you hold too dearly, you’ve got to learn how to put them aside. For some of us, this is hard. Our views are the things that define us. But you have to remember what the Buddha said about defining yourself. You limit yourself. And if you do have to define yourself, try to do it with something skillful. Remember, there are lots of members in your committee, the Committee of Your Mind. They, too, are potentials. If the angry potentials get used again and again and again, of course, they get stronger, they’re more insistent. They move into the committee meeting and they assume that they should be in power. But you have to look at the results. The elements of the mind, the properties of the mind, are thrown out of balance. The properties of the body are thrown out of balance. So even though your views may be right, they’re wrong in the way you deal with them, the way you hold to them. So watch out not only for the properties of the body, but also the properties of the mind. Because, after all, those are the important ones. The action of provocation doesn’t come so much from the physical properties as it does from the mental ones. They’re the ones that knock things out of balance most of the time. They’re also the ones you can do the most about. I mean, sometimes external properties, when it’s really hot, really cold, or there’s an unhealthy wind blowing around. Sometimes those can knock things out of balance inside the body. And in cases like that, all you can do is try to protect yourself as best you can. But the properties in the mind, those are the real troublemakers. And those are the ones for which you’re responsible. Remember, they’re the origination of suffering. Remember also that when the Buddha uses the word “origination” nine times out of ten, he’s talking about causes coming from within the mind. So that’s where you look. That’s where you keep up your guard. That’s where you show restraint, trying to be mindful and alert as you go through the day. And don’t give free range to your emotions. This is a path of restraint. So try to keep things in balance and be sensitive to anything that would provoke, either the mental properties or the physical properties, in an unhealthy way. And do your best to avoid it. Get around it. See through it. Don’t identify with it. Don’t take it on. Because the properties ideally should be in harmony. Now, their nature, of course, is that eventually they fall out of harmony. I mean, that’s how you die. So try to preserve it relatively within your power, at least to some extent, to bring them into balance, to maintain the balance. And as we remember from that image of the acrobats, one acrobat standing on the shoulder of another, each looking after his or her own balance helps the other. When you maintain things in balance, your physical properties and your mental properties, you’re not the only one who benefits. The people around you benefit as well.

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