In Long, Out Short

November 24, 2021

When Ajaan Foong would go to teach in Bangkok, he’d come back and tell me about some of the strange things that had happened, people having strange experiences while they were meditating. Then he would tell me about how he would solve the problem. And the general principle, he said, was that whatever the problem in breath meditation, it came from missing one of the steps in the Ajaan Lee Seven Steps. So there’s a good to review every now and then to see which step you haven’t been paying attention to. And the one that tends to get overlooked the most is that one where he says you can not only breathe in long and out long, or in short and out short, but you can also breathe in long and out short, or in short and out long. You’ll find that that kind of breathing, where it’s unequal, will have an effect on the energy level in the body. If you’re feeling hyper-tense, it’s good to try in short and out long. Or if you’re trying to raise the breath energy level in the body, it’s in long and out short. So you might give that a try. Part of that is that you emphasize the long in breath. You let the body breathe out on its own. If you squeeze the breath energy out as you breathe out, it doesn’t have a chance to get full in the body. Because that’s what you want, is a sense of fullness. Remember, the breath here is a quality, not of tactile sensation. It’s one of the elements in the body. That’s a point that often gets overlooked. When the Buddha classes the in-and-out breath, it’s there as part of the breath element, something in the body already. After all, the body is the part that does the breathing. The air comes in and out, but the energy for the breathing comes from inside. And the level of energy goes up as you emphasize the in-breath. It tends to go down as you emphasize the out-breath. If you find yourself depleted after a session of meditation, perhaps your out-breathing is too long or been emphasized too much. And there is a tendency, as things calm down, that the out-breath gets longer. But if you get the level of energy in the body up, you’ll find that the breathing gets shorter and shorter, more and more subtle. There’s less of a need to exchange things, as long as the mind is really still. You’re using your brain less because you’re not thinking about all kinds of things. That’s the main user of oxygen in the body. So the oxygen needs to go down. But you still want a sense of full energy throughout the body. This is where it’s good to think of the Thai translation for samajjhanya, which we translate as “alertness.” There are two parts to the translation. One is uruttva, which basically means “you know what you’re doing, you know what’s happening,” and two are pram, “all around, all at the same time.” That quality of alertness is all around, all at the same time. That’s what you want. This fills the body, and there’s a sense of breath energy filling the body. It’s not squeezed out. You can work at this part by part. Think of the hands. When you breathe out, is there any squeezing of any nerves in the hands? If not, just allow that sense of fullness in the hands to stay. And then think of it moving up the arms. Then you can try the samajjhanya. Same with the feet. Relax all the muscles of the feet. Think of breath energy permeating the whole thing and then building up, up the legs, up the spine. Because you’re trying to work toward a state in which the in-and-out breath gets more and more calm, which requires that there be a lot of breath energy in the body. You might think of it as your energy reserves getting filled up, filled up, filled up. Some people have a floating sensation as they emphasize the in-breath and let the out-breath do its own thing. As long as your attention is steady, you’re okay. This is another thing that tends to get overlooked. Our attention tends to go in phrases like music. Have you ever looked at the way music is written? You’ll see that there are these phrase markings. A certain phrase may be a couple of measures long or shorter, depending on what the composer wants, in terms of which notes flow into other notes. There’s a slight break, and then there’s more of a flow, and then there’s a slight break. Our attention tends to go in those ways as well. There’ll be a flow for a while, and then a slight break, and then another flow. The problem is that in those slight breaks a lot of interesting things are happening, but we’re not paying attention. And as you’re settling in, that’s okay. Because your thoughts, direct thought and evaluation, tend to go in phrases as well. But when you drop that thinking and just want to be continual with the breath, you don’t want those breaks in the phrases. You want the sense of your focus staying and running, running, running, running with that break. And the way you see things you wouldn’t see otherwise. But for the time being, you don’t have to register them. Just try to maintain that steadiness of focus. And you’ll find that things can get very, very still. Because we need the stillness in order to see the movements of the mind. The movements of craving, clinging, greed, aversion, and delusion start out very subtly. And you want to be able to see them as they’re starting out much better than seeing them when they’re full-blown and have taken over. And to see them when they’re getting started, you have to be really quiet. Otherwise, they just fall into the background noise. And a part of those intentions that the Buddha said that we do when we’re not alert, they still have karmic consequences. That’s the unnerving thing. We like to think that the only actions that we do that have karmic consequences are the ones that we’re alert to what we’re doing. But these ones where we’re not alert, the Buddha said, also can have consequences. So you want to lower the noise level. So at the slight sound of the beginning defilements, like the sound of mice in the wall, that you don’t really hear unless you’re really quiet, you want these sounds to be able to stand out. So you’ve got to get quiet. But again, the more you can stay focused, the more you’re alert. For the time being, you want to really work on your focus. Wait to analyze the beginning thoughts and the beginning defilements after the focus has been established. You’re working on skills here. We like to think, “Get a little bit of concentration and I can get a lot of insight.” But then what do you do with those insights? The steadier your concentration, the more you’ll be able to see. What does the mind do in reaction to an insight? That’s often more telling than the insight itself. So you want a state of mind that’s not amazed by any insights, that’s not impressed with them, that just notes them but stays still. That attitude teaches you a lot right there. So you want to be aware, alert, all around, as steadily as you can, as smoothly as you can, so that the slightest irregularities will show up. This is how concentration practice allows you to see. It takes some work to get the skill down, getting the mind concentrated. You aren’t going against the flow. You are, as Ajahn Lee would point out, trying to find something constant in the midst of what is inconstant, easeful in the midst of what’s stressful, something you can control in the midst of what’s not self. And for the time being, insights into the three characteristics, you put them off to the side. Like that chant we had just now that said, “They’re always true, but the question is, are they beneficial?” And the answer is, not always. Like right now, you don’t want to be thinking about how inconstant your concentration is unless your purpose is to make it more constant. Those three characteristics and three perceptions have their time and place. Anything that would pull you away right now, apply the perceptions to those things. But apply the perception of concentration to the state of the mind as you’re trying to keep going and going and going, without freezes, without break, without squeezing the breath energy out of the body, letting the breath energy get full and maintaining it, having a sense of well-being to tap into. That all helps you see things more clearly. It also helps you be less hungry for the defilements, less willing to side with them. So it’s helpful in many ways.

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