Intrigued by the Breath

January 23, 2022

When I first encountered Ajahn Lee’s instructions for breath meditation in Method Two, I was intrigued. One, because he talked about working with the breath in various ways, making it long, making it short, deep, shallow. And the other was that he talked about breath energies in the body and using the breath energy down the spine, down the legs. As a way of developing a whole-body awareness, I was intrigued for several reasons. One was because I’d always been told that in Buddhism we don’t manipulate the breath. In yoga, they do, but here we don’t. You just have to be with the breath however it is, comfortable or uncomfortable, whatever. Which, of course, is a lie. The Buddha never taught that. He taught to breathe in ways that give rise to pleasure, breathe in ways that give rise to rapture. He taught us to calm the breath. He taught us, basically, to take a very proactive attitude toward the breath. The second reason was that I was intrigued by working with the breath energies in the body. As a child, I lived mainly in my head, so I wasn’t all that sensitive to the breath in the body. And on top of that, I had a lot of injuries when I was a child. I had three concussions, a nail through my foot one time, and there was a lot of tension around those injuries. Then I just became more sensitive to the breath in the body. That became one of the activities that was really interesting, was figuring out where the patterns of tension were in the body, like the tension in my foot where the nail had gone in. I had totally forgotten about the nail, but I noticed there was tension in my right foot. So I would work with the breath energy there, trying to spread the breath energy down the leg and out the foot to release the tension. And one day the tension just snapped like a rubber band that had finally been released. I had a vision of what had happened. I was in the second storey of the barn on the farm where I grew up, and we were playing jumping into a pile of hay. It turned out there was a nail under the hay, and my foot went right into it, or it went right into my foot. I say this as a way of pointing out how, if you want to stay with the breath, you have to be mindful of the body as you go through the day. It’s a lot more interesting if you’re exploring where the patterns of tension are and how you can release them. You begin to notice sometimes that you release a pattern of tension, and then as you turn your attention to something else, the tension will come back. So how do you keep it released? You have to stick with it. Notice where the temptation to tighten up comes from. And chase it back. Often you’ll find that a pattern of tension in one part of the body is actually caused by a blockage in another part. Or sometimes it’s simply caused by the way you’ve been habitually holding your body. So try holding it in a different way. Look at your posture. When I was at Watasukaram, they had a skeleton hanging in a glass case. I would sit in front of it. Because it was hanging, the spine was straight. I would look at the spine of the skeleton and think about my own spine. Did it seem to be straight? Were there any muscles pulling it out to the left or the right in any spot? If there were, how do you release the tension in those muscles? Of course, there’s the whole problem of sitting for long periods of time. Sometimes we’d have a two-hour session. And when I was brand new, I found that my legs went to sleep pretty fast. So I realized that if I was going to not go to sleep like that, I’d have to work with the breath going down the spine and into the leg. And I worked with it and looked at the different spots in the spine and realized that the tightness in the leg came from a tightness in the spine, up by the neck. If I didn’t keep that spot in the neck, then my legs wouldn’t go to sleep. So all this comes under interest. Finding something interesting to do with the meditation, cittah is the Pali term, where you’re really intent on what you’re doing because you find it intriguing. Here it is, this whole area of your awareness, which most people, especially nowadays, are spending so much of their time in their screens, tend to block out. How you feel the body from within, what’s called proprioception, has a lot of things you can play with. And you can use the breath as your basis for learning about this. Notice when you breathe in, where it is the energy of the breath seem to originate. We think of the breath as the air coming in, starting at the nose and going down. Where does the actual energy of the breath come from? If it weren’t for the energy in the body, that air wouldn’t come in the nose. So where does it seem to originate? And where it originates, from there, does it spread evenly through the body, or is there something that seems to be blocking it? If there’s a blockage, can you release the tension? And then keep it released. A game you can play is, instead of starting in the middle of the body, start out at the extremities. Start with the first joints of each finger. Try to get a sense of where they are right now. Think of the bone in the middle. Then ask yourself, “Is there any tension around that bone?” If there is, relax it. Then go up to the second joint of each finger, then the third joint, the bones in the palm of the hand, or the back of the hand, whichever side you want to look at it from. And through the wrist, up the forearm, the elbow, the upper arm, the shoulder. And start down at the toes, then work up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, go up the spine, into the skull. Especially when you get to the third joint, the spine, if you feel that there are muscles that are pulling it out of alignment in one way or another. See if you can bring things back into alignment as you work up vertebrae, vibratora. This gives you something to do, and you see results. Because if you simply stay with the breath as it is, or scan the body as it is, you don’t feel like you’re accomplishing anything, and it gets boring very quickly. And you’re certainly not doing what the Buddha said, which is to breathe in such a way as to give rise to rapture and give rise to pleasure, and then allow the rapture and pleasure to spread through the body. Think of that image you had of the bathman working the moisture through the ball of soap dough, kneading it in, kneading it in so that it’s everything is moistened. Or think of the breath as allowing whatever sense of pleasure you find with the breath to seep through all the nerves of the body. And get a sense of where the breath channels are, the areas where it flows most easily. Get a sense of where the intersections are in the channels, where they cross. One very prominent intersection is down around the breastbone. Ask yourself if that area is tight. Loosen it up and see if you can keep it loose all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. And as you get up from the meditation, see if you can keep it wide open as you go through the day. It’s important to realize that meditation is something you do. A couple of years back I was teaching in Malaysia, talking about doing mindfulness practice, doing jhana practice. One of the questions afterwards was, “You’re talking about meditation as if it’s something you do. We’re told that mindfulness is something you don’t do. You’re just supposed to be. As for jhana, there’s nothing you can do,” they said. “You just wait until it comes on its own.” But again, I’d never seen the Buddha teach that way. All of his instructions are, “You do this, you do that. You breathe in this way, you breathe in that way.” When there’s a sense of rapture, okay, then you let it spread. Because this is a path that we’re doing. The path is something to put aside. It’s fabricated. You have to put it together. There are people either engaged in struggle of one kind or another, or engaged in a skill. The one image he has of relaxing is of a person who’s walking and says, “Why am I walking? Why don’t I sit?” And then another person says, “Why am I sitting? Why don’t I lie down?” Well, that has to do with your distractions. You relax around your distractions. But all his other images for the meditation have to do with people mastering skills. The turner with his lathe. The cook learning to fix what food the master likes. The person with his head on fire trying to put out the fire with a lot of mindfulness and relentlessness. There are no images of relaxing your way to nirvana or just being very passive about watching things. All of his images are of people experimenting. You try this, you try that, see what the results are. As he said, you find the Dhamma through commitment and reflection. You do something and then you reflect on what you’ve done. And as with the cook, you fix some food that your master doesn’t like while you’re trying to figure out what the master does like, and you fix something different. That’s when you get your reward. So do what you can to make the breath interesting. And it is an interesting element in the body, the fact that we have this energy flow coming in, going out, like the tides on the sea. And it has the potential to give rise to a great deal of pleasure. A strong sense of fullness is good for treating different diseases in the body. Diseases that are caused by tension or stress respond very well to the breath. As you learn to release the tension, use the breath to heal things in the body, soothe things in the body. Then the mind gets into concentration without you having to think about concentration. You’re there because you’re interested in what’s going on, interested in what you’re doing. So realize you’re not just watching the body as it is, because the body doesn’t exist as it is. There’s an element that you’re doing all the time in the present moment to shape the potentials coming in from the past. And the best way to get to know that present moment shaping is to do it consciously. And when you do it consciously, you run into your old habits of how you used to do it. If you don’t push things, you don’t see them. In other words, if you simply assume that the way the body is is simply the way it is, there’s nothing you can do about it in the present moment, what you are doing in the present moment is going to go underground and you’re not going to see it. That’s where all the fabrication lies in what you’re doing right now. And the fabrication lies right next to ignorance. As Ajahn Sawat used to say, “If you really want to know ignorance, look right next to it at fabrication.” What are you doing to fabricate things right now? By the way you breathe, by the way you talk to yourself, by the images you hold in mind, by the feelings you’re developing? So when you’re playing with the breath, you’re not just playing around. You’re learning about something really important. How the way you fabricate your experience has been causing stress and how it doesn’t have to. That’s right in line with the Buddha’s most important message, which is that the suffering we have that weighs the mind down is something that we do, but it’s also something that we can undo. We don’t have to wait for anyone else to come and be nice enough to do it for us. But we learn about this potential by testing it, by experiencing it. And at the very least, in the beginning, keep yourself interested by experimenting in different ways. And from interest it grows into discernment, as you learn from what you’ve observed.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/220123_Intrigued_by_the_Breath.mp3>