Fluent in Breath

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There was a famous author who had been raised by missionary parents in China back in the beginning of the 20th century. And so she grew up totally bilingual. And she said her mind was like a bifocal mind. You notice if you wear bifocals, you either look at the little tiny square, or the bigger square, but you can’t mix the two. Within each square, things make sense on their own terms, in terms of that square, in this case in terms of that language. Each language has its way of looking at the world, and there’s kind of an instinctive pattern to it. And they can be very different. So think about that. One language is useful for certain things. Another language is more useful for other things. But they have their uses, and they both have their ways of looking at reality that really are real. But they’re different. So the question is, which reality is useful for your purposes? It’s good to think about this when you think about the breath energy in the body. Some people find it very instinctive. Other people have trouble. The body seems to be just a lump. Are you going to push energy through there? Are you going to get a sense of flow? I’ll back up a bit. Remind yourself that as you’re sitting here with your sense of the body, as you feel it from within, it’s already flowing. There is a quality of flowing there, just as there is a quality of solidity and a quality of warmth and coolness. It’s simply a matter of resetting your glasses, choosing which squares you’re going to look at the body through. You think of the body as being this big lump, and you’ve got the breath coming in through the nose, and somehow you’re going to squeeze that breath into the blood vessels. That creates a lot of problems. So that way of looking at the body is not going to be useful, even though there’s a certain reality to it. Yes, the body is this big solid thing. But for the purposes of the meditation, change your perspective, change your framework. Your first experience of the body actually is energy. So hold that thought in mind. If it didn’t flow, you wouldn’t be able to breathe. You wouldn’t be able to move your body at all. You’d be paralyzed and without any sense of feeling. So something’s flowing. So look at what you’ve got and say, “Okay, this is flowing. It may not be flowing well, but at least it’s flowing.” To what extent can you see that it does flow? You’re three or four steps away from reality, whereas your native language is right next to reality. Each language has its take on reality, focuses on certain things, ignores other things. So you’re learning the language of the breath, the language of the body as you feel it from within. That requires that you try to be as sensitive as possible to at least thinking of this as a possibility. It can be that way. There are people who’ve gone through life sensing breath energy in their body. They function perfectly well. It’s not so much that it’s exotic. It’s just using different perceptions. It’s like looking at your disease from different types of medicine. You go to an allopathic doctor, he’ll ask you certain questions. You go to a homeopathic doctor, you get other questions. You go to a Chinese doctor, other questions. Same body, same disease. But it’s approached from different ways, and they’re asking you to be sensitive to different things. So you’re here with the breath. Remember what the Buddha said: you try to breathe in such a way that you give rise to a sense of rapture or refreshment or fullness. You try to breathe in such a way that gives rise to a sense of ease. And then you allow that sense of rapture and ease to flow through the body, saturate the body. And if you think of the breath clearing the way, with the breath already flowing, it makes it a lot easier for the pleasure to flow, easier for the rapture to flow. So this way of perceiving the body has its real uses. It’s a poor vocabulary for how we feel the body from within. Our medicine focuses on outward symptoms. The doctor will say, “Well, where does it hurt?” And you say, “Well, it hurts here, it hurts there.” But sometimes it doesn’t hurt. It just feels weird. It feels strange. And we’re often at a loss of words to exactly describe those sensations. So you’re learning a new vocabulary. That means stepping back and asking yourself exactly, “How does it really feel on its own terms right now? And to what extent can I feel this as flow, energy flow?” And then you bring all the other factors that the Buddha recommends here. And you try to harden, alert, and mindful. Mindful here means once you’ve got that frame of that particular way of looking at the body, you try to hold that frame in mind. And then you’re alert to see. If you look at the body from that perspective, how does it appear? And what you catch yourself doing that makes it feel not so good. Because a lot of the blockages of the breath are things that we do. If it was left to its own devices, it probably would flow very well. But we have our emotions, and our emotions tend to bottle up breath energy here and there, create a lot of tension in this part of the body, that part of the body. When you come into a pattern of tension someplace, remind yourself, “Okay, this is blocking the breath. What if I perceive it as being open, permeable?” And if there’s a blockage, what’s pushing on what there? So once you have the right framework, then you begin to get a sense of what you can do within that framework. Again, it’s like learning another language. In the beginning it’s just memorizing, “This word means that. That word means this. If you want this tense, you have to say it that way. This tense, you have to say it this way.” And for a long time, a lot of your conversation is simply useful phrases in a very general way. But then you can start creating sentences of your own. You can begin to communicate things that are not in the textbooks, but actually have some meaning for you. Here, again, it’s the same. Once you’ve learned to be sensitive to the body, the sense of this, your awareness of the body as being primarily breath energy, then you can do things with it. That’s how you’ve been doing things with it already, in a very ignorant way. Whenever there’s a very strong emotion, things get bottled up: tension here, tension there. And sometimes the tension just lasts long after the emotion is gone. You have to allow it to relax. That’s one of the things you want to be sensitive to. Where are these patterns of tension in the body? Can you relax them? Can you breathe through them? What’s the right angle to that? If you’re trying to breathe through a particular part of the body and it seems to be resistant, okay, breathe into that. Let it be the one part that’s nourished. See how that feels. You’re learning the language. You’re learning to make use of it so that you develop your own sense. You’re learning to be the creator. Then you get more and more fluent. You feel more at ease. So think of this as learning a new language, a language that you’re going to have to use. For the sake of a brief trip, that’s a language you’re going to settle into. So keep this point of view in mind, that there is breath energy there. You’re already experiencing it. And then be alert to changes in the breath energy. You’re going to become sensitive to when it’s flowing well, when it’s not flowing well. Relate to the body in a skillful way based on this way of looking at it. When you think in these terms, it’s a lot easier for the mind to settle in and have that sense of pleasure and rapture permeating the body, saturating the body with your awareness wide open, feeling really at home. That’s when you can say that you’ve mastered the language.

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