Training With the Breath

August 20, 2023

Rainy nights are good for meditating. If your mind wanders outside, it runs into the rain, which drives it back in. You want to make the range of your awareness just the body, with maybe an inch or so of breath energy surrounding the body. And that’s it. See what you can learn by restricting your attention this way. When the Buddha teaches breath meditation, he starts out with two exercises in simply discerning the breath. Discerning when it’s long, discerning when it’s short. And discerning, of course, means noticing which kind of breathing feels good. The Buddha defines discernment as penetrating knowledge of arising and passing away, leading to the right ending of stress. The emphasis there is on the word penetrative. You see things in terms of cause and effect that some of your actions give rise to. Some things give rise to better results than others. So you want to nurture the good causes, the good actions, and drop the bad ones. So starting out with long and short, or maybe in long and out short, in short and out long, notice what feels best right now. You can add other variations as well. Heavy, light, fast, slow. Deep, shallow. Try to discern what feels good. From that point on, every step is a training. It’s a skill that you develop. This is an important point to note. We’re working on mindfulness of breathing. Mindfulness doesn’t mean simply accepting things. It means being passively aware of things. When you establish mindfulness, you have an agenda. As the Buddha says, one of the duties of right mindfulness is to remember to give rise to skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones. He defines it as a governing principle. Mindfulness means trying to give rise to skillful things that are not there. Once they’re there, you try to keep them from passing away. So you’re not just watching things coming and going. You’re trying to get a sense of cause and effect. This is a skill that we’re working on. Years back, I was asked to give a talk on karma to a group of meditators. I made the point that the Buddha’s teachings on karma are very directly related to his teachings on mindfulness, because you’re working on a skill. The way he teaches karma is that some of the things coming into your present moment experience are coming in from the past, and others are coming from your present intentions. So you can use your present intentions to make a difference in what you’re experiencing right now. If it weren’t for that present input, as the Buddha said, if we were simply recipients of karma, we’d be unprotected, we’d be bewildered, we’d have no idea what to do, because everything would be determined by the past. At least, that’s what we believe. But when we know that our present input makes a big difference in what we’re going to experience right now, then we can focus on that. As I was giving the talk, I was getting puzzled looks from people. I found out later that they’d been told that mindfulness meant not doing anything at all. You just be with whatever comes up. Learn to accept whatever comes up without judging. But the Buddha again and again compares mindfulness practice, concentration practice, to skills. And skills involve judging, like the wise example of an experienced cook learning how to judge which actions of his employer are meaningful in terms of what he should fix as food and which ones are not. So you’re judging what kind of breathing feels good, which kind of breathing is good for getting the mind to settle down. It’s a skillful use of your powers of judging and judgment. And then you can train yourself. The first item in the training is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. And again, that’s a skill you have to develop. Some people find that it comes easily. Other people find that it doesn’t. They’re able to focus on one part of the body in a certain range. And then if they focus on another part of the body, the first part disappears or just gets ignored, which is normal. Which is why the breath meditation instructions talk about working on different parts of the body, one by one by one, going around and around and around. So you get familiar with each part of the body and how it relates to the breath. When you breathe in, how do your hands feel? How do your arms feel? How do your shoulders feel? How do your feet, your legs, your pelvis, your torso, your neck, your head? Get familiar with these parts of the body. And if the breath doesn’t seem to be flowing well, just think it can flow well through those parts. The Buddha does list the breath as one of the elements or properties of the body itself. It’s not classified as a tactile sensation. It’s classified as part of form, how you feel the body from within. And there are breath sensations everywhere. Some of them are a lot more blatant than others. But you want to learn how to get familiar with all the different parts of the body. And then gradually you’ll see that the different parts begin to connect. So you can be aware of one spot in the body, but it connects to everything else. It may not connect to the whole body all at once, but you find that you get larger and larger portions of the body. You also get more sensitive to what are entirely called the breath channels, lines going through the body where it feels like the breath is flowing more quickly, more smoothly. Then other parts of the body will get sensitive to that. As you get sensitive to that, that helps to connect the different parts of the body in your awareness. And then when you finally can get the whole body in your range, then the next step is to keep it. Because there is a tendency for your range of awareness to shrink. That’s how the mind creates thought worlds. It focuses on one little spot in the body, and that becomes the seed or state of becoming in the mind. That’s how we slip off into the past or future. It’s almost as if to go to the past or the future, you have to go through a little tube. You have to make your awareness very small, so you don’t even think about it. Think of it as being aware of the body, as just an awareness there. And then it slips off. So one of the best ways of making sure you don’t slip off and don’t fall asleep is to keep that full body awareness going. Keep reminding yourself, “Full body, whole body.” And breathe in a way that’s energizing. This is not listed in one of the steps in breath meditation. But the Buddha does mention in other places that before you allow things to calm down, you first have to energize them. He mentions this in discussing the factors for awakening. There has to be energy. There has to be a sense of refreshment, rapture, before you want to go for real calm. Because otherwise you can put yourself to sleep. Especially if the mind is already headed in the direction of wanting to relax. And for a lot of people, that’s when they come to meditation. They’re looking for some relaxation. So they go straight for the calm, quiet, easeful sensations, and they drift off. So ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would be energizing right now?” And at what point have you had enough of that energy? That’s when you begin to calm things down. This, too, is a skill. As the Buddha said, “You calm bodily fabrication,” which is his way of describing calming the in-and-out breath. When it’s fully calmed, you’re in the fourth jhana. And you can’t get to the fourth jhana just by suppressing the breath. You get there by going through the different stages, allowing rapture to fill the body and then to calm down, allowing there to be a sense of pleasure in the body and allowing that to calm down, keeping the mind very, very still, but at the same time maintaining that perception of everything in the body connecting. That’s what’s going to allow you to get to the point where the breath gets so subtle that you don’t feel like you’re breathing in and out at all. Whatever breath energy needs there are in different parts of the body, they’re met by excess energy in other parts. You need that perception of the breath channels being wide open, everything being connected, and the breath energy moving very fast. So you don’t calm the breath by suppressing it. You calm it by getting everything connected, taking care of the body’s energy needs, remembering that breath also originates inside. Some people, when they realize they haven’t been breathing, feel like they’re missing something that should be coming in from outside. But actually, remind yourself, what is it that allows the air to come in and out? It’s the breath energy in the body already. Where does that originate? In some cases you’ll find that it seems to come from one of the centers that Ajahn Lee mentioned. Sometimes it seems to come from someplace else. One of the most fruitful perceptions is to think of every cell in the body breathing in, breathing out in unison. That allows your awareness to spread through the body. In a way, everybody gets equal attention. We use these perceptions for the impact they have on the mind and the impact they have on the breath. So it’s good to open your mind to the possibilities of what ways you can perceive the breath. Ajahn Lee is very helpful in talking about the breath energies in the body. It’s his way of answering that question that comes from reading the texts. They talk about how when the mind settles down and there’s a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, you let it spread throughout the whole body until it’s saturated. One of the best ways of inducing that is to think of the whole body breathing. The breath channels open so the ease and the rapture can spread very quickly. Nourish the body as it needs to be nourished and then settle down. This is some of the work you can do in here. If you keep your attention restricted to this area, you can tell yourself, “I’m going to find pleasure and happiness. It’s got to be in here.” Then you start getting ingenious about how you actually can give rise to a sense of well-being in here. This is one of the reasons why we have the Eight Precepts. They’re basically precepts of sensory restraint. So instead of looking for your pleasures in terms of what you can see and hear and smell and taste and touch, you bring your awareness inside and try to make the most of what you’ve got right here, right now. So you’ve got a whole hour to explore this. See what you can learn.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230820_Training_With_the_Breath.mp3>