

Sensitive to the Breath

December 25, 2011

When you work with the breath, it's good to not have too many preconceived notions about what a good breath is going to be, or the general direction that you're breathing should go. I was reading a letter recently from someone who'd picked up the idea someplace that, as the mind settles down, your breath grows shorter. And so he put the cart before the horse and tried breathing shorter in order to get his mind to settle down. And he found that his short breathing was not refined at all. It wasn't making his mind calm. There are people who will stifle their breath energy in hopes of making it refined and calm, and end up putting themselves to sleep. So you really have to be alert to what the body needs right now, what the mind needs right now, so the two of them can stay together.

If the breath is too soft, too refined, and you're not really ready for it yet, the body is not really ready for it yet, it depletes the level of your energy. Of course, if the breath is too harsh, it's hard to settle down.

It's also easy sometimes to get stuck on a particular type of energy. There was a woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang's. She was a very good meditator, but she had been away from him for a long time. It was actually during my first visit there that she showed up at the monastery. And one of the comments he made to her that evening as we were sitting in meditation was, "Wait a minute, you're spending too much time with the cool breath, the very refined breath." He said, "It's not good for your health to spend all your time with refined breathing. You have to vary things. You have to look at what the body needs. There are times when it needs energy, so you've got to breathe in a way that gives it more energy." So try to listen carefully to the body's needs. And look at the mind's needs as well.

We talk about listening or looking at the breath, but, of course, it's not a matter of looking or listening with the eyes or ears. It's a matter of just being really sensitive to what the body needs. Now, you do want to be very careful, and this is where the analogy of listening comes in. Think of it as an analogy, of course. There are times when you listen very, very carefully for very subtle sounds and that helps to refine the breathing, because the mind is more intent and more sensitive at that time. That's when it's really ready for refined breathing. But if you're not ready for it, you just drop off to sleep. So in the same way that you would, say, listen to the inner voices of a piece of music, the ones that are hard to hear, or to a very soft sound off in the distance, try to make yourself really, really quiet, and very, very

intent. That will help make the breath more subtle without your forcing the breath too much.

But listen to the body and the mind: If you run up against the symptoms that show that the breathing is too subtle, then you've got to go in the other direction. Some of the symptoms are headaches, a sense of constriction in the body, that the breath energy's been closed off. That's when you have to work with breathing that may be a little bit uncomfortable for a while. Push it, expand the rib cage more than normal. Expand your stomach, the abdomen, more than normal. Really emphasize the in-breath as much as possible. And put up with the fact that it's going to be uncomfortable for a while, as you get yourself into a new cycle, or a new rhythm of breathing. Then, when the body's ready, you can let things calm down again.

What all this comes down to is, as you're experimenting with the breath, remember not to let your preconceived notions get in the way. Even the instructions of the breath meditation saying, "Breathe in a way that's as comfortable as possible": There are times when you have to breathe in a uncomfortable way to get out of a breath cycle that's too gentle or too stifled.

This means you've got to use your ingenuity.

Years back I mentioned to Ajaan Fuang that he should write a little guide to breath meditation. He said, "Well, everything's already there in Ajaan Lee's books." And I said, "But those are just the basic principles, and you've got a lot of little details that are really fascinating." The ways he would recommend that you play with the breath: Sometimes he'd talk about breathing in the bones. Another time he talked about how when he was young, he tended to suffer pretty heavily from headaches. He found that if he could emphasize the breath going down the spine and think of it going from the base of the spine out into the ground, that helped to relieve the pressure in the head. He had lots of little tricks like this.

But he still resisted the idea of writing a book about them. And part of the reason may have been that learning these little tricks requires ingenuity. It *develops* your ingenuity. And ingenuity is an important skill you want to develop on your own as a meditator. You work with the basic principles and then you stretch them to see how far they stretch before they reach the breaking point. There are times when you experiment too much and you go too far away, and then you've got to recognize that and come back. But recognize also the fact that the principles are there as something to hold onto in the beginning so that you're not totally lost. They'll point out areas where you should focus, or where you might profitably focus, but what you're going to see depends on you.

And you have to learn how to read not only the breath, but also the body and the mind. Learn to read the times when the mind is exerting too much control over the breath. Those times when, no matter how you breathe, it always seems wrong. In a case like that, you have to use a psychological trick. Just say, “Okay, I’m going to let the breath do it’s own thing. I’m just going to sit here and I’m not going to help it. If the body’s going to breathe, it’s going to have to breathe on its own.” It’ll be quiet for a little bit, and then, of course, the body will have to breathe. All you have to do is watch. That can help get you out of that particular dead end.

So there are lots of little details that are really useful in the practice that you can’t put in a book, in any kind of book. The most useful books are the ones that give you the general principles, point out where to look, what questions to ask, as a starting point. Because were not here to simply clone somebody else’s awakening. We’re not robots.

I had a really scary phone call this evening from this guy who had suddenly realized that, yes, we are robots. “What the Buddha said about there being no self is really true,” he said. “Why would anyone want to have the idea of the self?” And he had this really creepy laugh as he said it. It sounded like somebody going crazy. So I reminded him that the Buddha did not say there is no self, he did not say we are robots. If you don’t use your sense of self, you can’t function. You have to use some sense of self all the way to the very last step before awakening. Which means that we have to be sensitive to how you use our sense of self, when it’s skillful, when it’s not.

This task of learning how to develop your sensitivity is the hard part of the meditation, the part that really demands a lot out of you: learning how to read the situation, how to know when you’ve gone wrong, how to back off, and try something different. Meditation is not a process of putting the mind through a meat grinder or through a machine or some sort of factory, where the process will take care of everything for you. It’s only as you develop your sensitivity to cause and effect—what you do and the results you get, what’s working and what’s not working, what things are connected, what things are separate—along with your ingenuity, and learning how to benefit from that sensitivity: That’s what’s going to bring about progress in the meditation.

So it exposes you. You’re not protected on all sides by instructions. But it’s only when you expose your mind in this way that you’re really going to learn something new.