

## *Breath Energies*

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An emotion is a thought that has an impact not only on the mind but also on the body. And it has that impact through the breath. Not only the in-and-out breath, but also the breath energies moving throughout the different parts of the body: along the blood vessels, along the nerves. It's strange that some people don't even think there is a breath moving along the nerves and blood vessels. When I was in France, I was telling people to imagine the breath energy moving in different parts of the body. And several people complained that they didn't like this kind of make-believe meditation, as they called it. And I explained, it's not that you're imagining something that's not there. You're teaching yourself to imagine something that is there but that your conceptual framework doesn't have room for. It's like that problem they had with the satellites over the poles. For many years, the satellites were getting data showing a big hole in the ozone layer. But the computer program designed to read the data had not been designed to imagine that such a thing was possible, so the data were thrown out.

There are many things that you do not see, do not detect, because your mind doesn't have the concept for them. Actually, the breath energies are things that we're using all the time, but we're ignorant of them and so we tend to create suffering out of them. You see something you fear, something that you like, something that you've experienced as a danger in the past, and it immediately goes into the breath. There's the perception, and the perception triggers something in the way you breathe. You start suffering the physical symptoms of fear. The same with anger, lust, all these emotions.

So when we come to focus on the breath, some people find it difficult territory to negotiate because they've been subconsciously using the breath energies to amplify emotions. You can get your heart to start beating a certain way; there's a tightness in the stomach or in the chest. This is basically how the parts of the mind that want to go with that emotion force you to go along with them. It's as if they hold the body and the breath hostage. They put a squeeze on your nerves, saying that "If you don't give in, we're just going to squeeze harder and harder." And then if you've given in, they go away, and the breath gets back to normal.

Ideally, you want to learn how to short-circuit that process by getting your discernment to go directly to the breath so that you can breathe calmly even when the signals in the brain are telling you that there's something to be feared or to be desired.

But when this territory of the breath in the body carries a lot of emotional weight, your mind's instinctive reactions of how to direct the breath energy are so ingrained that it's hard to focus on the breath without simply going along with those old patterns. In cases like that, it's good to stop focusing on the breath and start focusing on a topic that calms the mind down. Goodwill is a good reflection. Reflection on karma is often useful as well. There are certain issues in life where we feel that we've been unjustly treated, and it's good to remember that karma has been going on for a long, long time. And the back and forth that we've had with one another has been so, so long and so complex that there's really nobody to keep tally. And it wouldn't be worth it anyhow.

Putting the individual events of your life into that much larger framework sometimes help take out a lot of the sting. You can step back from them and view them with a little bit of distance. Because that's the important part of getting past these things. Instead of being *in* them—in other words, taking them on as what you are right now—you step back and see them as a process, a part of a much larger process. And then as you've taken a lot of the sting out of the stories and the perceptions, you can go back to the breath.

Here, too, you have to keep careful watch over your perceptions. There was a Zen monk, Hakuin, who suffered from what he called Zen Sickness. He'd get headaches every time he meditated. He finally came up with a technique, which was to imagine a big ball of butter on the top of his head that was melting, so all the sensations from his head on down were just melting down, down, down, both as he breathed in and as he breathed out.

And that's one of the sicknesses that can come from the way you breathe in. Sometimes we instinctively think of the breath energy going up. It gets pulled up, pulled up, pulled up, and that leads to a lot of tension in the head. Well, think of things going down, down, down. Focus on the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. As you breathe in, think of the breath energy going out those parts of the body. As you breathe out, think of the breath energy going out.

This works because the breath energy is very sensitive to perceptions. So, create some new perceptions for yourself, the images that you hold in mind. In other words, you don't have to use physical force to press the breath down. You just learn which perceptions the breath will respond to and you learn how to be good at holding those perceptions in mind. Only when they have the time to be there for a while can they start seeping into whichever parts of the brain are controlling the way you breathe and re-wire them.

As you engage with your sense of the body like this, it's also good to remember that what you feel as your sense of the body is primarily breath energy. So if there's a sense of blockage, don't think of yourself as having to force the breath through the blockage. Just back up a little bit and remind

yourself that the breath is actually there first. So simply imagine that the breath has the right to go right through. Return it to its prior place in your sense of the body so that the pains in the body aren't directing the breath, or the tightness in the muscles is not directing the breath. Your perceptions of where the breath can flow are directing the breath, so try to give priority to those. And use some imagination. Try to observe, when you breathe in, how the breath is moving. Get sensitive to the movements of these energies. And then if there's something that feels unhealthy or uncomfortable, just turn the energies around.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee has you breathe in at the back of the neck, because ordinarily when you breathe in you tend to be thinking of pulling the air in through the nose, so you're pulling back and up, which gathers tension into the back of the neck. But if you think of the breath energy as entering at the back of the neck and then going down the spine, you're going in the opposite direction. That can relieve a lot of the tension that comes from the way you've been subconsciously imagining the breath.

This is why the descriptions of breath energy are so important, because they give you something new to imagine, a new set of perceptions to bring to what's going on right here—perceptions that allow you to change the way the energy flows. If you can't even imagine the energy, how can you change it? At least, you can't consciously change it, but subconsciously it's going on all the time. This is why certain parts of the body are related to certain memories. There's a subconscious connection between the breath at that time and the impact it had on that part of the body. And sometimes the impact was so strong that that part of the body feels wounded.

I remember reading of an African shaman who came to the States. He said he noticed a lot of people seemed to have a big hole right where their throat should be. That he associated with unexpressed grief. And there are other parts of the body that also have certain patterns of energy that come with grief, fear, you name it. If you can imagine these energy wounds, then you can work with them. If you can't imagine them, you can't work with them.

Another image I gave when I was in France was of learning how to imagine that the world was round. When you tell this to a child, the child has no evidence to begin with, even though he's standing right on top of the round Earth. But you tell him, "Use your imagination," because to him, the ground looks flat. And then as he grows up, he begins to realize that the perception of the round Earth allows him to do things that the perception of a flat Earth wouldn't. If you're going to fly to Bangkok from Los Angeles, you can save time by flying over Alaska. If you fly to Paris, you can save time by flying over Greenland—because the world really is round. If the world were flat, those plane routes wouldn't make any sense. You couldn't make use of them.

In the same way, we can imagine the breath energies, making use of the close relationship between perception and the flow of the energies in the body. You can use those perceptions to help straighten things out inside and to take a lot of the fangs and claws off the emotions that lie buried in the wounded parts of your energy body.

So learn how to use the power of perception and its close relationship to the flow of the breath in the body. Calm the mind down if the perceptions are too loaded emotionally until you can deal directly with the breath energies from a new perspective. Then you can make use of them.

The Buddha says that when there's a sense of ease coming with the breath, let it spread throughout the whole body. When you can think of the breath energy as going through the body, it's a lot easier to let the feeling of ease spread along with it. So learn how to re-imagine the body so that it can become a vehicle for right concentration, and from right concentration on to right discernment. The potentials are all here. You simply have to expand your imagination to make the best use of them.