Focused on the Breath

August 15, 2025

There has been a request for a talk on breath, and it makes sense. Here you are focusing on your breath, and I’m talking about other things. It can often get in the way. So, tonight’s talk is about breath. Let’s start with a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and see if you can make long, deep, breathing comfortable. This doesn’t mean that you’re sucking a lot of air into your lungs. Remember, breath is the energy flow in the body. It flows down the nerves, flows down the blood vessels, even the little nerves and little blood vessels. And one way of making long breathing comfortable is to think of all the vessels opening up. So as you breathe in, everything has to be filled with breath energy. Not just the lungs, but your arms, your fingers, your legs, your feet, your toes, all the little muscles in the head. And sometimes we think of some of the muscles in the body doing the breathing while the breath goes through other muscles, which means that the ones who are doing the work are getting starved. So think of them getting the breath as well. In fact, you can focus on the muscles that you usually use to breathe. Think of filling them with good breath energy as you breathe in, as you breathe out. When you breathe out, try not to squeeze the breath out. Just let it flow naturally. We are exerting control over the breath here, but we’re trying to exert control in a way that’s friendly to the breath and friendly to the body. Wise control. And then if you’ve nourished the body well with long breathing, then you can let it go shorter if you like. Or if long breathing feels good, keep it up. You can try shorter breathing, or in long, out short, in short, out long. In long, out short tends to be energizing. So if you’re feeling tired, you can energize yourself that way. In short, out long tends to be relaxing. So if you’re tense, try that. Well, the John Lee made the comment one time that he noticed that old people, when they breathe, tend to be in short, out long. If you do too much of that, it saps the energy of the body. So learn to have a sense of enough. And John Fung had a student one time. Her concentration was quite good. But there’s one period when she’d been away from him for a long time. And she came back and visited. We sat as a group and meditated that night. And he said to her, if you do nothing but cool breathing all the time, your meditation is going to lack energy. So there are times when you need to relax, and other times when you need to ramp up your energy. You have to learn how to read things, as to what’s just right. And if your mind wanders off, just bring it back. Whatever the thought was that pulled you away, just drop it. And you’ll be back here at the breath. You don’t have to pull it back to the breath. It comes naturally. But be on the lookout. Because the mind, parts of the mind will want to wander away again. And you have to figure out who they are, what they’re thinking. They’re very good at being very quiet, behind the scenes. And one way to see them is to, one, be alert that they’re there. And two, notice the little movements of your mind, little thoughts that you tend to not see. That you tend to take for granted, which is being background noise in the mind. This means that the more quiet you can get the mind, the more quiet you can get the breath, then the more you’re going to see. So one of the aims of the meditation is to allow the breath to grow more and more still, more and more gentle. Don’t force it that way. Just think of all the breath channels in the body, all the blood vessels, all the nerves, just being wide open. And think of everything being connected. When things are connected, then the breath energy has more area to fill. So let it fill. And then think of it staying connected. The reason it doesn’t stay connected is we start using the body. As a notebook. In other words, we think about something and to remember it, we tense up a little bit here, tense up a little bit there. There’s a cartoon one time I saw, a woman meditating. And all of a sudden the word “think” blotted out her forehead. Then, in other words, another “think” blotted out her chest. Then “think, think, think” until she was nothing but a whole pile of “think, think, think, think, think.” Because our thoughts reside not only in the mind, but they also leave their traces in the body. And those traces are what get in the way of the breath flowing well. So, if you sense anything like that, let it dissolve. Think of breath flowing freely in all directions, all around the body. Not only just in the physical body, but also around the body, like a cocoon. Because your breath energy is not restricted to the area that ends inside the skin. Then allow your awareness to fill that area as well. Now, in the beginning this may be hard. Because the mind has a tendency to shrink as it gets ready to go into another thought world. So start out by surveying the body section by section. You can start down around the navel, or you can start at the back of the neck. It doesn’t really matter where you start, but the important thing is that you go through the body systematically, and you cover the whole body through your surveying. So you can start at the navel, watch that area for a while as you breathe in, breathe out, and ask yourself, “Does the breath energy feel good there?” And if it doesn’t, what can you do to it? Adjust it. One of the things you can do to adjust it is, if there’s any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. And don’t let the tension build up as you breathe in, and don’t hold on to any tension as you breathe out. And then you can move up to the area in front of the stomach, then the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the head. Focus at the back of the neck, think of the breath energy entering there and going down both shoulders, the arms, and going down both sides of the spine to the tailbone. And then focus down on the tailbone and think of the breath energy entering there, and going down through the hips, the legs, the ankles, the feet, the toes. Then we cover the whole body. And you can do it again, as many times as you like. Because you’ll find each time as you survey the body, you will find patterns of tension or patterns of tightness that you missed the first time, or that build up tension as you move from one section to another, so you can erase the tension again. And do this until you’re ready to settle down. And you think you can manage whole body awareness. Don’t choose any one spot in the body. That’s most convenient to stay focused. And then from that spot, think of your awareness filling the whole body. Think of the breath filling the whole body. Sense of ease filling the whole body. And then maintain that in balance. If you find that you drop it and run after thought, just drop the thought. And come back and try to recreate that feeling in the body again. If you catch the thought quickly, it doesn’t take too much to recreate that feeling. So try to be really alert. As you protect your full body awareness. And there’s nothing much else you have to do. Whatever rhythm feels good. And it will vary from time to time. It’s not necessarily the case that short breathing is better than long breathing, or long breathing is better than short. Just give the body what it seems to need. As you maintain this sense of broad awareness. Learning how to maintain it is going to be important. Because there are parts of the mind that say, “OK, enough of that. Let’s move on.” You have to learn how not to believe those voices. Because we’re here not just to rest in concentration. We’re here to learn about the mind. And one of the best ways of learning about the mind is trying to keep it in concentration. And learning how not to be deceived by other thoughts that would pull you away. It wants to entertain, it wants variety, it wants change. And so it’ll go for any thought that pulls it away. So you have to learn how to resist that tendency in the mind. After all, the mind wants a sense of ease. Well, here is a sense of ease. And it’ll say, “Well, I’ve had enough ease. I want something else.” What you want now, though, is to learn how to watch your own mind. See thoughts coming up in the mind, but don’t go into the thoughts. Stay in the breath. And you’ll learn a lot. Because one of our big problems in life is that we do things simply because an urge comes in, and we follow the urge. And if someone were to ask us, “Why did you do that?” You don’t really know. You just felt like it. “Why did you feel like it? What was the conversation in the mind down in the subterranean levels that led to that urge?” You’re not going to see that conversation unless your mind is really still. And you’re not going to be able to put a stop to it if you see that it’s unskillful. Unless you’re really still. And determined to see. Determined to understand. So we’re here for stillness. But the stillness is a means. It gives us energy. It gives us a sense of freedom from our usual thoughts. But it’s also a means for understanding. For seeing things in the mind you didn’t see before. And as you work with the breath at the same time, it’s good for the body. It’s good for the organs of the body to have breath energy flowing through them. And you’re with the force of life. Without this breath, you wouldn’t be alive. The mind wouldn’t be able to tell the body what to do, and it wouldn’t know what’s going on in the body. It’s what holds everything together. So, get to know it well. All too often we find other things are more interesting. We let the breath go on automatic pilot. And it will do some work for us. It’ll keep us alive. But that’s pretty much it. But if you pay full attention to the breathing, you’re going to learn a lot about your mind, learn a lot about the body. So it’s good to get to know this property of your awareness, this property of your body. And to make it your home. It’s where you can work from home. And you get your work done at the same time there’s a sense of well-being as you’re doing it. It’s good all around.

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