

Tapping into the Breath

July 17, 2017

Time and again, I say when you're focusing on the breath to remember that the breath is not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it's a flow of energy in the body. And one of those flows is the flow that allows the air to come in and out. The question is, "Where does that flow come from?" It doesn't come in with the in-breath. It actually comes from within the body itself. So if you're having trouble breathing comfortably, you might ask yourself, "Where does the breath actually start in the body?" Ajaan Lee lists what he calls the resting spots of the breath. And you can try any one of those. In fact, you'll find that there's no one spot where the breath starts. But you can focus on one and make the most of it. Say, for instance, that you're going to focus at the tip of the breastbone. You have to relax around that spot in order to allow the breath to spread from there in a way that actually feels good for the body. Because when we have different patterns of tension in the body and then we tend to breathe with those patterns of tension, we just make things worse.

You have to remind yourself that there is a healthy breath in there. And you're going to allow it to move through the body by relaxing around it and noticing what feels good at that spot in the body. If you feel like you're breathing in too much or breathing out too much, be very sensitive and be very on top of this. And you'll find that the breath really does become soothing. This is especially useful when you have a disease of one kind or another. You can use the soothing breath to work through a lot of the tension that may build up around the pain or the organ that's malfunctioning.

In the cases where there's unpleasant energy in some spot of the body, you may want to move to another spot first. Focus your attention there. And then, when you feel more confident, you can go to the spot that's actually malfunctioning and ask yourself, "Where is the healthy breath in here?" Notice the attitude not so much that you're going to *make* it healthy. You're just going to *allow* it. It's in this way that you learn how to use your perceptions—and how to change your perceptions so that they actually are conducive to settling down.

As you work with the breath in this way, you'll find that there are lots of different levels. It's like the water table at Wat Asokaram. They would dig a well in a very unlikely spot. Here they were at the edge of the ocean: a mangrove swamp, part of the tidal flats. And they would dig a well to use the water there. It didn't seem promising, but they found that there were different levels. You would dig

down to a certain level and the water would be brackish. You'd dig down to another level and it would be fresh. And then another level, and then it would be brackish again. It was like a layer cake, and the trick to digging the well was getting it just the right depth to tap into a layer that was good. In the same way, your body has lots of layers, lots of different energies moving around. Try to dig your well down to a spot where the energy is good. And then give it space to maximize it.

In Thai they have a phrase, “not being able to breathe with your full stomach,” which means that there's tension or tightness in the abdomen and you don't feel like you're getting your full refreshment from the breath. Again, it's not so much the air going down into the abdomen. It's the question of whether the energy's allowed to move or propagate freely through the area of the abdomen so that every part feels nourished by that movement of energy. Now, your problem may not be in the abdomen, but you know where your difficult spots are in the body. So you can play with them. Remind yourself there may be a layer in there that's actually healthy. Try to find it.

It's the same as when you've got problems with rapture. When rapture comes on, some people like it, some people don't. If you're one of the ones that don't, learn how to change your perception so you don't feel threatened by it. Some people feel threatened by it because they've had experiences with almost drowning, and it's a similar sensation: a feeling of intense fullness throughout the body. You have to remind yourself that you're surrounded by air. There's no problem. But even then, as you move the rapture through the body, it's good up to a point. Then there comes a point where you have to go beyond it. Here again, think of layers. Find the layer of energy that's not quite so active, that's calmer, with a sense of ease, and focus there. The movements of rapture can be in another layer for a while. As you're not focusing on them, after a while they begin to dissipate.

So think of the body as having many layers. And you're going to try to tune into the layer that's right for what you need right now. Some layers are more energizing. Some are more calming. But it's up to you to make your survey and to figure out how to relate to these energies. Here in English, we don't have a really good vocabulary for these energies. And even in Thai—where they talk about them and people tend to have a more intuitive sense of what we're talking about when we say say breath energy—the vocabulary is not that large.

Ajaan Lee talks about breath energies that spin around in place, breath energies that move back and forth, the visiting breath, he calls it, which is the in-and-out breath. And then there's the still breath, a breath that doesn't move at all.

That's in a layer there, too. He says the middling layers are the ones where we're working with the energies that are there in the blood vessels and nerves, as we spread them through the different parts of the body. And they stay there in the body. They don't go in and out. They help the in-and-out breath, but they themselves don't go in and out. Those are the ones that you want to work with, because they're good testing ground, both for getting a sense of well-being that really goes deep, deep, deep inside, and for teaching you the power of perception, that the labels you apply to the body really do have an influence on how you're going to be experiencing the body; how you're going to be able to settle down in the body.

The still breath—if you can get your well down to the still breath, and tap into it—is a place to rest. So use that when you need to rest. But you remind yourself that the meditation is not all about resting. It's about learning what's going on between body and mind, because this is a good testing ground for all the issues in the mind. The body is the first thing you're aware of. The body is the first thing that you're moving around; the area of reality that you're most responsible for. And yet it's not-self. That doesn't mean you have no control over it. It just means that there are limits. So you want to explore the limits and make the most of them.

Years back, I knew someone who was going to study in Thailand and she'd been practicing Ajaan Lee's method. She was staying with an ajaan who didn't have any background in Ajaan Lee's method. And he told her, "Why are you adjusting the breath? It's just a fabrication." She told me that, and my response, although I didn't say it to him, was "Well, why are you washing your body? Why do you clean your body? It's a fabrication." You learn how to take care of these things because they'll take care of you. And in taking care of them skillfully, you learn an awful lot about the body and the mind: all the five aggregates. And if you want to know what's not-self, what's beyond your control, you try to exert as much control as you can in this area. You'll find there will be limits. It's when you want to run into the limits that you say, "Oh, this is really not-self."

But you don't give up beforehand. If you give up beforehand, you're letting go, as Ajaan Lee says, like a pauper, someone who doesn't have anything to show for letting go at all, because there was nothing there to begin with. But if you make the most of these potentials that you have in the body, the potentials you have in the mind, then when you let them go, they're still there. They're of use to you, and they're of use to other people. It's like working hard and getting a good car. You don't take it to bed with you. You leave it outside. You use it when you need to. And you let other people use it, too. In other words, you let go of something, but

there's a lot of use to be still gotten out of it, as opposed to not having the car to begin with.

So explore the potentials you have here in the body for dealing with energy. And once you've found the areas where the breath rests and the breath comes from, protect those. Don't let them get exhausted. Don't let them get depleted. Have a sense of their being full, even during the out-breath. Then they can fill the rest of the body with good energy that allows you to settle down with a sense of "just right": well-balanced, with the pleasure and rapture the Buddha describes as permeating the entire body, because you've tapped into the right level.