

Focal Points

July 14, 2009

When you focus on the breath, it's important that the breath feel very refreshing: that it feels really good to breathe in and then breathe in again, breathe in again, that there's a part of the body that feels really gratified, really nourished by the breath. Part of this involves choosing your spot to focus on, what Ajaan Lee calls the resting spots of the breath. He gives a list: There's the top of the head, the middle of the forehead, the middle of the head, the palate, the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum—that little breastbone that comes sticking out near your heart—and the point just above the navel. You might try focusing on any of those spots for a while, to see which one feels most refreshed as you breathe in. Or you may find there are other spots in the body that feel especially refreshed.

One way of approaching this might be to ask yourself: Where do you carry tension in the body? It might be in the shoulders, the back of the neck, the backs of your hands. If you find that you are carrying tension there, you might tense that spot up for a minute and then relax it, to see the difference between tension and relaxation there. Then be very conscious that all the way through the in-breath, you're going to keep that spot relaxed; all the way through the out breath, you allow it to stay relaxed. Any tension that may be there, you think of it dissolving away. Then keep watch to see when the tension starts to build up again. As soon as you detect any tension building up, relax it, release it.

Or you may ask yourself which parts of the body tend to seem most blocked from the breath. I once heard of a psychic from Africa saying that most Westerners seem to have a lot of blockages around their throat from all the sorrow in their lives that they haven't been able to express. So you might ask yourself, is the throat a very sensitive spot? Do you carry a lot of tension there? Do you carry a lot of pain there? If so, think of the breath relaxing everything around that spot. Don't go straight into the spot quite yet, because it'll be resistant. After all, it is a spot where you've tended to deposit a lot of your pain in the past, so it's not going to open itself up to direct attention right away. You have to sidle up to it.

Another spot where there tends to be a lot of pain is that area around the sternum, around the heart. I know in my own case that that's where a lot of pain resided. It was a very sensitive spot and it didn't react well to my focusing directly on it right away. But I'd work around it, work around it, dissolving away the

edges. And then one day, something broke open and for some reason that spot allowed the breath to come in. It was very refreshing, and it was very tender.

So if you find that the breath seems mechanical or neither here nor there, perhaps it's because there's a spot in the body that's not allowing the breath energy in, but would eventually benefit from good breath energy. As we were saying last night, the goodness of the energy depends an awful lot on the stillness of your awareness, the steadiness of your awareness, the inquisitive interest that you have in trying to be as skillful as possible, as sensitive as possible to what's going on. Try to develop that attitude in mind and then bring it in around your most sensitive spots or around the different energy channels in the body. Then when you can stay focused on that spot, getting sensitive to what kind of breath energy the spot needs, you find that the breath becomes a lot more interesting, a lot more riveting, something that's really nourishing.

So the choice of the spot where you focus is important. Ajaan Fuang once said that when people would come to him with problems in the meditation, they usually came from ignoring one of those seven steps that Ajaan Lee listed in his Method Two. And this is one of the steps: choosing the spot that you want to focus your attention.

Another step that's important is when you start out that you take some good long deep in-and-out breaths, to wake things up, shake things up in the body, because sometimes that will alert you to areas of the body that have been starved of breath energy. You've been breathing in a particular way throughout the day and it's tended to shut off some parts the body. But when you tell yourself to take good long deep in-and-out breaths, it forces some of those areas to open up. That might be another way of alerting yourself to where the breath energy has been neglected or where you've allowed tension to get stored up, stashed away. And it helps clean it out a little bit.

All of this comes under the heading of being sensitive to what the body needs, getting a sense of how you habitually hold tension and how you can use the breath to help release that tension. You find this especially useful as you go through the day. When you're involved in some jobs, some activities, it's possible to stay with the in-and-out breath. Try to keep it as refreshing as possible. In other situations, it's more difficult. In those cases, you may want to just be aware of the general feeling-tone of the body, or you can choose any one of your sensitive spots. Because after all, as you get more and more acquainted with the different energy centers of the body, you'll get a sense of when they seize up. When a strong emotion comes in, you tend to seize up in a particular part of the body, a

particular spot, and then from that there's a chain reaction. Other centers tend to get seized up in a chain reaction throughout the body.

So one way of maintaining breath awareness throughout the day is finding the first spot that tends to get seized up. Where do you habitually react first, say, when something negative happens, when there's fear, anger or whatever? Again, it might be in the middle of the chest, the throat, wherever. When you're engaged in an activity that doesn't allow you much room to be with the whole in-breath or the whole out-breath, just focus on that one spot. Try to keep it open, relaxed. And as soon as you detect the slightest tension there, open it. Relax it again and again and again. Tell yourself that regardless of whatever happens, you're going to keep that center open. This helps make the breath interesting.

And this quality of interest goes a long way to help you stay with the breath and to keep that as your frame of reference throughout the day. If there's no sense of well-being, no sense of gratification, no sense of nourishment that comes with staying with the breath, then the meditation gets very dull, very tedious, and the mind is going to be very quick to want to look outside for other things, to find some sort of satisfaction there to get its visceral hit. But if you can maintain this inner sense of awareness, you find that when you find your really sensitive spot, and you can keep it open and relaxed, feeling nourished and full, then it's very appealing. You like staying there because there's a long continuous sense of well-being that goes straight to the heart. When that spot feels nourished, then the nourishment that you can get through the senses seems a lot less interesting.

The Buddha talks about how this is an important principle to use in exercising restraint of the senses throughout the day. There's a sutta where he talks about six different kinds of animals. If you were to tie a leash to each of the animals and then tie the leashes together—you have a crocodile who wants to go down to the river, and a monkey that wants to go up in the tree, and a hyena that wants to go feeding in a charnel ground, I've forgotten what the other animals are—they all pull and pull one another until finally the strongest one pulls the others along with it.

In other words, wherever the desire is the strongest, wherever the interest is the strongest, that's where you go. You find your awareness proliferating around that particular sense, or the sensations at that particular sense. But, the Buddha says that if you were to take those six animals and tie them to a post, then no matter who was strongest or who was weakest, they'd all stay around the post as long as the post was strong. The post here is mindfulness of the body. And for the mindfulness of the body to be strong, there has to be a sense of well-being, a sense of nourishment that comes from staying here.

So try to find your sensitive spot, or your sensitive spots, and learn how to use your steady attention together with the breath energy to satisfy the needs of those spots, so that staying with the breath really does feel good there, really hits the spot. And as you learn how to stay with that spot, it's like riding a wave—keeping your balance so that you don't put too much pressure on it, you don't get too loose or too wobbly around that spot. It's just right, and the feeling of the breath is really gratifying. That helps keep this post of mindfulness of the body really firm.