

Breath Energy

June 7, 2016

When we focus on the breath, it's not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It's the feeling of energy in the body. Some people say, "Where is the energy?" It's in your sense that you have a body. You sense that through the breath, through the breath energy. If you were to hold your hand out right now, so that wasn't touching anything, you'd still know that you had a hand. You'd feel it from within. That feeling from within: That's breath energy.

In some parts of the body there's a definite feeling that it's flowing, and in other parts it seems more static. In other parts it seems like there's nothing there at all. Your thigh could be missing; your shoulder could be missing. It's because you've lost touch with that part of the body. There're other parts of the body where the energy seems to be very tight, as if there's a solid lump.

In the beginning, you work around those spots. Find the areas in the body where you have a sense that the simple sensation of having a body feels at ease. It doesn't have to be anything particularly outstanding or especially rapturous or pleasant, simply that the body feels present, and there's no tightness. If you want, you can start with your hands. Consciously relax the muscles of your hands. Then slowly work your way up your arms: the muscles around the wrist, the muscles in the forearm, the muscles around the elbow, the upper arm, the shoulders. Then start with your toes. Relax the muscles around your toes, your feet, go up through the ankles. Up through your legs. The hips, up the backbone.

If you sense any tension or tightness anywhere, allow it to relax. And try to notice: There may be a tendency as you breathe in to tighten up and then to stay tight as you breathe out. See if you can breathe in without tightening up at the spot where you're focused. When you've managed that, then move up the spine even further—section by section, vertebra by vertebra if you can—all the way up through your neck and then into the skull. Think of all the muscles around your head relaxing—and that they can stay relaxed whether you're breathing in or breathing out.

As you relax things in this way, you find that some parts of the body get a sense of fullness. Allow that to be there. Protect it. How do you protect it? You don't protect it by building a shell around it. You protect it by allowing it to stay open. The more parts of the body you can do that for, the better. The more you can connect them up, the better still.

And you can check your posture. Are you leaning one way or the other? Try to sit in a way that's erect, and if there's tension in any part of the body that's keeping you from being erect, allow that tension to relax, too.

You can go through the body as many times as you like, starting at the hands again and going up the arms. Start at the feet again, go up the feet, the legs, the hips. When you hit the back, try to notice: Are you holding more tension in one side than the other? If you are, try to allow it to relax. You can do the same with your legs, the same with your arms: Compare them. Which side is holding more tension? Can you relax that side? Then can you keep it relaxed with the in-breath, with the out-breath, so that the in-breath and out-breath make no difference there? If you feel a sense of flow, fine. If you don't feel a sense of flow, at least try to keep things open, relaxed, and balanced.

You're trying to make a home here for the mind. The more you can get things settled and open like this, the easier it is for your awareness to seep down into the body and settle in. After all, when the Buddha describes right concentration, he's talking about a full-body awareness. Where there's a sense of ease, he says to allow it to work through the body. A sense of fullness or refreshment? Let that permeate through the body. Again, you don't push it through. Just allow it. You'll find that the sense of the body just sitting here gets a lot lighter because you're not tensing up around things so much. That makes it even more pleasant to stay right here.

As for the parts of the body where you can't sense any energy, or the energy doesn't seem to flow or seems to have disappeared entirely, let them be for the time being. Work on the parts that are malleable, that respond. Then when you feel well settled there, you can try to work through the other parts of the body as well. This is because the mind is less frantic now, less impatient. You've got a sense of well-being, so you don't want to destroy it. It's when you don't have a sense of well-being that you're pushing things around roughly inside.

So be patient. If you find that there's a part of the body that has disappeared, try to notice: Where you do feel the parts closest to it? Then ask yourself: Where is there any sense of any connection between those parts in there at all? It may not be where you expect, because sometimes our internal sense of the body gets very distorted, so that your sense of your arm may not be where your arm is if you were to open your eyes and look at it. Well, just deal with the internal sense on its own terms without imposing on it your visual image of the arm—or of the leg if that's where the problem is.

Just ask yourself: Where do you actually feel things? They may not be where you expect to feel them. But if you can base this inquiry on a sense of well-being, the work goes a lot more smoothly, and is more effective because you're not so

impatient to push things around. At the same time, as you're calming the mind, you're gaining some insight into how your perception of the body is going to have an impact on how you actually feel the body—and how you can work with your perceptions.

When the Buddha gives instructions on breath meditation, whatever aspect he's working with, whether it's working with the body, working with your feelings, or working with your mind, it's always a matter of sensitizing yourself to it first: What do you actually feel right here, right now? And to what extent are you actually shaping that feeling? With the breath, one way you can test this is to try breathing with different rhythms. Make the breath heavier or lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. See what impact your intention has on the breath and what impact that way of breathing has on your sense of the body. Even though it may feel a little artificial, remind yourself that it feels artificial only because you're not used to it—after all, you're already making an artifice out of your sense of the body to begin with.

The mind is constantly putting things together. There's a sensation here, a sensation there, and there's something in the mind that puts them together to make sense out of them. Sometimes we make good sense; sometimes we don't make such good sense. For the purpose of concentration, the sense you want to make out of the body is that it's open and responsive. So go for whatever perception helps to open up the sense of the body so that it does respond. Your sense of the body, as you feel it from within, feels at ease, light. Tranquil but solid—solid in the sense that things aren't antsy in the mind. You feel really comfortable right here. Try to nudge your perception of the body in that direction.

This is called calming fabrication. And in calming fabrication, you've got insight and tranquility working together. The tranquility is in the calming, and the insight is in understanding things in terms of fabrication. At the same time, when developing concentration, you're seeing to what extent you can go against what the Buddha calls the three perceptions: the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. The Buddha is not asking you to say, "Gee everything in the world is inconstant, I accept that. Everything fabricated is stressful, everything is not-self. I accept that." That's not what he's asking you to do. He's not asking for your allegiance to sign up on some program.

He's asking you to use these perceptions in a way that's useful, and the best way to understand them is to first try to make things as constant and easeful and under control as you can inside—again, control here, not in the sense of being a control freak or a micromanager, but learning what actually works. Which

perceptions help with getting the breath more nourishing? Which perceptions help the breath permeate throughout the body, so that everything feels connected, everything feels coordinated?

Work on those perceptions, because you want to deal with perceptions, ultimately see how far can you make the state of your mind constant, easeful, and under your control. Then you run up against the areas where you can't, and that's where the insight's going to come, at that boundary line. It's not going to come just by reading books and saying, "Oh I understand that this is inconstant, stressful, and not-self." The insight comes from pushing against the boundary and seeing where you actually do run into what's inconstant, stressful, and not self. This will come in stages.

The important thing is that, for the time being, you work on this: being with the breath, being with the body, having a sense that the mind and the body fit together snugly and with a sense of ease. When the mind has a sense of ease, it can look at things with a lot more dispassion, a lot more objectivity. If everything in the body feels frazzled, your thoughts will get frazzled, too. And if you can't feed on a sense of well-being here, you're going to start feeding on whatever things—thoughts of revenge, thoughts of jealousy, thoughts of whatever—present themselves to the mind.

The better your mind is fed, the less likely it is to want to go for poison. It's when we're hungry and are willing to stuff anything at all into the mouth just to fill up the stomach: That's when you start eating poison. Unskillful mind states suddenly seem attractive, you feed on them, and that aggravates things even more.

So one of the purposes of breath meditation is to soothe things. In one of the Buddha's analogies, he said when there are unskillful states of the mind, working with the breath and soothing the body with the breath is like the first rains after the hot season.

If you've ever been in India at the end of the hot season, you know that everything's really dusty. When the first rains come, they clear all that dust out of the air. It's the same with the breath, when the breath feels good, and you're with a sense of ease and refreshment, and you allow it to percolate through the body. Whatever unskillful notions or impulses that the mind might normally feed on just get washed out of the mind like so much dust. When you're in this state—secure, at ease—you can look at the petty concerns you have from the day and you actually see them as petty. They seem a lot smaller from this perspective than they do when you're in the midst of them. This allows you to step back and have some freedom from them.

So as you're feeding your sense of well-being inside the body with the way you play with the breath, you're also contributing to the well-being of people around you, because your mind is stirring up a lot less dust. You're not poisoning yourself. And when you're not poisoning yourself, you're not a burden on others.

So take some time to be with the breath. Get to know the breath inside throughout the body. It's there. It's simply that we often look past it. But if you can step back and give it some space and learn how to work with it, you find that the effort put into being sensitive to it is really rewarding.