

Breath Energies

April 19, 2015

Focus on how the process of breathing feels in your body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? As I've said many times, we're not dealing just with the feeling of the air coming in and out through the nose. There's also feeling of subtle movement in the body. In fact, there are many layers of subtle movement in the body that get progressively more and more subtle as you pursue them. As the mind gets quieter, you can sense these things. That counts as breath as well.

In fact, the movement of the energy is what allows the air to come in and out. It allows you to sense the body. It allows you to move the body. Try to get in touch with that and you'll find that you feel it in places where you might not have noticed it before. If you don't feel it, focus on the areas where you *do* have a sensation of movement and allow that movement to be as comfortable as you can make it. How comfortable is that? It's up to you – how sensitive you want to be to these movements.

Part of this depends on just allowing yourself to think in these ways. It's an aspect of your awareness of your body that you may have learned a very long time ago to ignore. So the first order of business is to allow yourself to imagine the possibility that it's there, and then to perceive it – that there is an energy flowing through your blood vessels. There's an energy flowing in the nerves, in the muscles, just outside the skin. There are many levels of energy here. The more you can make your mind quiet, the more you see the subtle ones. It's like trying to listen to a sound that's far away. You have to make yourself very, very quiet so that you can hear it.

You also notice that the more subtle your attention, the more subtle your awareness, the more the sense of well-being that comes from the breath and the pleasure that comes from the breath seeping into areas that used to be hardened inside. The fact that we've ignored this part of our awareness for so long allows us to treat it pretty poorly. Now that you've opened up to it, you begin to realize you've been harsh in the way you've breathed or harsh in the way you force energy through the body.

Often when we repress a thought or put it in denial, there's going to be a physical side to that repression as well. And over time, the traces of these repressions begin to build up. Parts of the body have learned not to trust you, so it's going to be a while before they open up to you. You've got to treat them gently. Show some gentleness in the way you deal with the breath energies that you are aware of, that can move, that can have a sense of flow inside the body. And when you treat them with gentleness, then the parts of the body that are connected with old buried thoughts will start beginning to trust you and then may begin opening up as well.

There's a Thai word, *patibat*, that's relevant here. It has two meanings. One is to practice, as when you practice the Dhamma or carry out a job. The other one is when you look after somebody. You *patibat khruba ajaan*, or *patibat phuu yai*, or *patibat phaw mae*—i.e., you tend to the needs of your teacher, your elders, or your parents. The ajaans will often make the comment that when we practice the Dhamma, we're also practicing ourselves. In other words, we're looking after ourselves here. And the way the mind and the body relate to each other goes through the breath energy. Because this is a really good place to get to know how to look after yourself inside, try to be more sensitive to it and show some more sensitivity in how you treat it.

Now, the problem is that as you begin to get gentler and gentler with yourself, the more sensitive to what's going on inside, you also begin to notice energies of the people around you. Some of them are beneficial. A lot of them are not. So you have to be like a turtle. Turtles have very sensitive bodies, so to protect those bodies they have very hard shells. In fact, one of the images in the Canon of a practitioner is someone who's like a turtle. He sees dangers, so he pulls his head in; he pulls his legs in. The fox tries to come and get the turtle, but the turtle knows the fox is there, so he just stays inside his shell; doesn't come out. The fox eventually goes away.

You need your shell as well. The shell here is not one that's going to totally blank out other people. It's not opaque. It's like the protective shell in those old toothpaste commercials for *Gardol*: a band of clear plastic. You see what's going on, it doesn't block your vision, but it does block bad things from coming in. And the breath can do that. The more you get the breath energy to fill the body, the more you have a sense that your awareness fills the body, then the less you can be invaded by other people's energies.

This, too, is an important skill to develop, to protect yourself in this way. And you find that you're also protecting others, because if you find that their energy is coming in, you tend to lash back out at them. But this way, people can stay in their respective places, as in the old saying that good fences make good neighbors. This is a good fence. So when you have it around you, you can be talking to people and their words can come at you and their energy can come at you, but you don't take it inside.

To make another analogy, it's like you've been using a vacuum cleaner. Every little piece of dirt out there gets sucked in. So now you turn the vacuum cleaner off. When you do that, you realize that their words don't really hit you. You've been sucking them in. As for their energies, you've been sucking those in as well.

So you fill your body with your awareness and fill the body with good breath energy. That's your protection. You can see what other people have to say, and you can actually sense their energies going around you, which means you know what's going on and you can respond. You have to tell yourself you've got something good here inside that you want to protect and you

don't want anything outside to knock you off balance. You've got to use your breath and your full-body awareness to protect it.

There's another analogy in the Canon of a man carrying a bowl of oil on his head. The bowl is filled to the brim with oil and there's another man standing behind him with a raised sword, ready to cut off his head as soon as one drop of oil spills out of the bowl. So as the Buddha asks the monks, "Would that man let himself get distracted outside?" Because in addition to walking with a bowl of oil on his head, he's walking through a stadium where there's a beauty queen singing and dancing on the stage on one side, and a big crowd of people on the other side. He's walking between them. The beauty queen stands for all the attractive things in the world. The crowd stands for all the mind's normal reactions to those things. You've got to maintain your balance in between those. You can't let yourself get distracted either way. In the same way, you have this sensitive area inside the body and you want to keep it in balance. You want to keep it protected—because as you do, your powers of mindfulness grow; your powers of concentration grow; your discernment gets more and more sensitive.

Discernment isn't just a matter of learning words and then applying them to what's going on. It's a matter of sensitivity—noticing what you're doing. And sometimes what you're doing is very subtle and pre-verbal, dealing with the energy in the body. It's been so subconscious for so long that you haven't noticed it. Now you're going to bring it up into your awareness by making your awareness more subtle. The sensitivity is what provides the basis for real discernment, the kind of discernment that sees things going on in the body and mind that have been going on all the time, but you haven't noticed them. You've been rushing past them. You've been stepping all over them. Stomping all over them. Now is the time to give them some protection, because that way you learn a lot of lessons about the body and the mind—and particularly about the mind—that you can't learn in books and you can't learn from what other people tell you. You learn from your own sensitivity inside.