

Breath Meditation When It's Hard to Breathe

April 16, 2020

Some people think that those of us who practice breath meditation would be really up the creek on days when it's hard to breathe. That's not the case at all. If you really get to know your breath energy in the body, you can find that that knowledge makes difficult breathing a lot easier.

Think of Ajaan Lee when he discovered this method. He had walked three days into the forest, planning to spend the rains retreat there. Soon after he arrived at the spot where he was going to stay, he suffered a heart attack. From his description, it sounds like a series of attacks. He knew that he could possibly die. But he decided to look at what he had that might help him survive. He didn't have much in terms of medicine. The food was very meager. But he did have his breath. Even though the area around the chest may have been very heavy for him, he realized there was breath in other parts of the body. So he used that.

He had learned already that you can focus on the breath up in the head. He began to realize there was more. There's the breath that goes down the spine, the breath that goes down the legs, down the arms. So he took advantage of that. Working with the breath energies in the body, he was able to pull himself together and at the end of the three months of the retreat he was able to walk out of the forest.

I had a similar lesson shortly before I came back to the States. I had a life-threatening case of malaria. In malaria, the parasites come out of your liver and feed on your red blood cells. They starve your muscles of oxygen. I began to find that the muscles that were doing the breathing were getting very tired. It was getting difficult to breathe. Then I thought of Ajaan Lee's descriptions of the various places in the head and different parts of the body where the breath can come in and go out, so I focused my attention there. I thought of the breath coming in and out through the forehead, through the top of the head, in from the back of the neck, down the spine. The muscles that had been doing all the work got to rest, and other muscles pitched in. I was able to move the responsibility around. By changing the spot where I focused, I found it a lot easier to breathe.

Simply keeping the idea "whole breath body," "whole breath energy, whole body energy," can make a difference. I have a student who's got compromised lung capacity. It's gotten now to where she has to wear an oxygen monitor to keep her apprised of what her oxygen level is in her blood at all times. She began to notice that when she was meditating, and was doing whole-body breathing, that the

oxygen level went up. She hadn't changed the rhythm of breathing that much from what she ordinarily would do. But the simple fact of thinking of the breath energy, or thinking of expanding all the capillaries, all the way out to the skin, raised the oxygen level in her body.

So if you know how to deal with the breath, it makes it a lot easier to deal with times when it is hard to breathe. This is a skill we should keep in mind. As Ajaan Lee says, we have lots of potentials in the body, lots of potentials in the mind that we hardly use. They're very elemental, which is one of the reasons why we overlook them. We have space as well. You can hold a perception of space in mind when the body gets tight. When it seems like there's no comfortable spot in the body to focus at all, think of space. Space surrounds the body and can permeate through the body in between all the atoms. Even inside the atoms there's space.

That perception helps to cut through the shells of tension and pain that we can sometimes create. The mind has a tendency to play connect-the-dots. It connects a pain here in the body, a pain there in the body, and then it goes around and around and around and tightens up, winds you up in a casket of pain. Then you subconsciously try to use that sense of the wound-up body to do the breathing, to do the work, and that makes it even worse.

Do whatever you can do to cut through that sense of connecting the pain. Stay with the perception of space. Or you can have a perception of a knife that cuts through any point where you feel there's a line connecting one pain to another. Use whatever works.

If you have trouble focusing on any of these techniques, at the very least think thoughts of goodwill for all beings. Because one of the worst parts of feeling ill is that you start indulging in painful narratives. The fact that you're ill, the fact that you might be able to die, weighs the mind down at precisely the time when the mind doesn't need to be weighed down. It needs to find some lightness; it needs to find some opening. It needs to be in a position where it's not compelled to think. It's not a slave to the pains in the body, it's not compelled to think in terms of the restrictions that the body seems to be placing on it. You can overcome those restrictions by making your mind more expansive with a sense of space, goodwill, an enlarged breath energy that permeates not only in the body but also around the body.

All these perceptions can really help. You have to have the attitude that whether the body stays, whether it goes, the important thing is the state of the mind. You figure out everything you can to help maintain a good healthy state of mind. Even when your perceptions are screaming in your ears that you're going to

die or you're being confined in ways that you don't want, you don't have to listen to them. You have to figure out your way around them.

One way is to think of things in an elemental way. You've got elements here in the body. They may be out of balance, so think in ways that will bring them into balance, and if you can't bring them into balance, at least work with the breath. Work with a sense of an expansive mind, so that your mind isn't being pushed around by the body.

As long as we're healthy, it's good to figure these things out, to find these potentials so that we can draw on them when the time comes when we're not healthy.

There's one line of teaching that I really don't understand: when people say there's nothing to figure out, just be with things and you'll be okay. Actually, there's a lot to figure out. This is what directed thought and evaluation are for, to figure out how to get the mind to settle down, how to protect the mind, how to make use of the potentials you've got—because they don't come with labels, they don't come with sets of instructions.

We have the wisdom of those who have gone on before, people who've had experience in this way and left behind some ideas. We have to figure out how to understand their teachings and how to apply those teachings to our condition right now. We take their teachings as tools to explore what's going on in the body, what's going on in the mind. In this way, we can develop a body of knowledge that comes from our own exploration.

I've been reading about survivalists in Alaska. To survive, they've got to have a lot of knowledge. You've got to figure things out. One family I was reading about has a plane, has earth movers. The people in the family have to know how to fix these things. They can't say, "Gee, this is breaking down, I'll run down to the mechanic." The mechanic is hundreds of miles away. What you've got you have to understand if you're going to survive.

So you draw on the knowledge of others; you draw on your own powers of observation. You're trying to figure things out, so that when the unexpected happens, you're prepared.

This is even more the case with the survival of the mind. There are lots of tricks in the mind. The mind plays lots and lots of tricks on itself. If you don't want to be fooled by those tricks, you've got to figure them out.

So we have these potentials here: We have the breath, we have space, we have all the elements in the body, the basic properties of the body: earth, water, wind, fire. The space that surrounds and permeates it. The awareness that knows these things. And we have the ability to think. So learn how to use these elemental

properties. And don't let the mind get carried away by discouraging thoughts, despairing thoughts.

Even as the world seems to be closing in, there's a way out. The Buddha found that way, not by sitting around and simply accepting things as they are, but by figuring out what he was doing that was giving bad results, and how he could change his actions to get better results. He had a mind that was good at thinking in terms of similes. So he'd ask himself, "How am I patterning my actions? What other patterns are there?"

So use your ingenuity. Use your powers of observation. Don't overlook the basic elementary properties you've got. You'll find that they can help you work your way through, so that when the world does close in, you know the way out.