Being Breathed – II

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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At the beginning of the sitting round when the gong was struck we all bowed and exhaled in the same moment. The gong rang again. We straightened and the air entered each and every one of us at the same time. Another strike on the gong and as if one exhalation in this moment breath dispersed and mingled with the air in the Hatto.

Zen Master Anzan Hoshin told us In "The Pivot", one of the "Saturday Morning Talks" series given for general and associate students during the late 1980's and early 1990's that,

> *In the moment of breathing out,*
> *There is just each moment of the out breath.*
> *Each moment being this moment,*
> *This moment displaying itself as breathing out.*
> *There is a slight pause,*
> *It is ever so slight,*
> *A slight trembling,*
> *And then,*
> *Breathing in.*
> *And each moment of breathing in is this moment.*
> *Each sound that is heard,*
> *Each sensation that rises and falls,*
> *Is the activity, the turning of this moment.*
> *You and your world are arising here.*

You listen to me repeating Roshi's words or you might have listened to the tape and at the moment of hearing it's so clear. "Aha! Yes…of course…! At THIS moment it is so clear isn't it? I understand." Feels good.

You congratulate yourself. You pat yourself on the back because you understand. You think all the effort really has been worth it. "Yes!" you say to yourself as you are seduced by the "good" feeling, the "good" thoughts. "Yes, now I am really practising."

Excuse me? Excuse me!
You have forgotten the breath. You have forgotten to notice a thought as a thought.

"Oh no!" self-image declares, "not again…I thought I had something there."
Wait…Wait… Don't follow it. This isn't a problem even though self-image will try and make it one because that's really its only job. Anzan roshi says,

> *Breathing in turns to breathing out.*
> *Holding a feeling turns to holding a thought,*
> *Turns to holding another thought and another thought.*

The thoughts rise and fall,
Turning in the light of Awareness,
Turning in the knowing of them.

You see, you're not the only one in this Hatto who gets lost in thoughts and feelings; nor are you the only one in this Sangha, or this year, or this century. For 2600 years students have been getting lost in thoughts and feelings forgetting to notice this moment, this breath. Forgetting to notice the only thing that is going on – reality.

In the Satipatthana Sutta: Foundations of Mindfulness as translated from the Pali by Anzan roshi, the Buddha, Gautama Siddartha, is said to have instructed his students (who were required to be monks), thus:

Breathing in, one is mindful, breathing out, one is mindful.
Breathing out a long breath, one understands, "I breathe out a long breath."
Breathing in a long breath, one understands, "I breathe in a long breath."
Breathing out a short breath, one understands, "I breathe out a short breath."
Breathing in a short breath, one understands, "I breathe in a short breath."

This instruction is clear is it not? However it can be misunderstood. (And as Roshi has said, "If we can misunderstand our practice we will. And if we misunderstand our practice we practise our misunderstandings.)

It can seem as if this passage is instructing us to identify and judge the depth and the quality of the breath. Many of you have commented in practice interviews that you aren't breathing deeply enough or that your breath is shallow. And that's okay, but you have forgotten a number of things: First, those comments are thoughts. You notice the thought; we know that because you articulate it, in doing so noticed something that is true about how you were in that moment. That moment of noticing IS the only moment that you can practise and you do so by feeling the breath at the tanden, feeling sensations in the body. Noticing seeing, and hearing, and tasting, and touching, and feeling, and smelling, and breathing, you are practising in this moment.

Fortunately, endless opportunities are offered up for this noticing. Sometimes it can seem to be too much. Recently, a student, who was looking very worried, "It seems like practice is too much work. I can't keep track of everything. I keep trying but…" This student was asked to notice how experiencing was in THIS moment of breathing in and out. Upon doing so, the "trying" was exposed for what was: a pattern. This was a pattern that came up over and over again for the student in other aspects of life. "Oh my," the student sighed, "no wonder I feel tired a lot. I am trying to do things I can't do and that I don't have to do. I'm putting far too much energy into "trying to notice" when all I need to do is notice."

The Sutta goes on to say that:

One practises, "I will breathe out with full experience of the whole body."
One practises, "I will breathe in with full experience of the whole body."
One practises, "I will breathe out, calming the tendencies of the body."
One practises, "I will breathe in calming the tendencies of the body."

What can seem to be a thought that one is being asked to say to oneself, "I will breathe out with full experience of the whole body," is more a statement of intentionality, this instruction to practise cultivates, as you continue to practise, a knowing which is before thinking, and beyond, and without, words. You are noticing, simply noticing, that which is always already the case.

The Sutta continues:

> *Just as a skillful turner or a turner's apprentice, making a long turn knows, 'I am making a long turn,' or making a short turn knows, 'I am making a short turn,' just so monks, the monk practises breathing out a long breath knowing, "I breathe out a long breath.*

A turner as described is a potter or a woodworker. Whether we are a skilled potter or only an apprentice, whether we are a monk or a lay student, we have to know what's going on. We don't have to be an expert. We don't have to already know what we don't know in order to know this. We just have to be willing to learn from what is actually going on how to pay attention to what is going on. We have to be willing to know that we don't know and to be willing to make mistakes.

As we sit we can know the turning of the breath. Sky turns to breath. In-breath turns to out-breath and is this moment displaying itself as the out breath. In the "Pivot" Roshi said,

> *Each sound that is heard,*
> *Each sensation that rises and falls,*
> *Is the activity,*
> *The turning of this moment.*

Speaking of "turns and turning" I went skiing two days ago for the first time in two years. You may remember that beautiful day with the bright, clear blue sky. It was glorious.

I'm not a great skier. As with almost everything it seems, I was a late starter and then I stopped in the mid-eighties. This was just about the time when I started practising and studying with Roshi. I did not go skiing for over a decade. One day a student asked me if I would like to go skiing and it sounded like a good idea. On the way to the slopes I noticed some thoughts coming up which, if fed with my attention, could have turned into feelings I might in the past have called "fear" or "anxiety" or "worry." I practised the moment of noticing and guess what? That first run was the best time I had ever had skiing. What I had learned on the zafu was presenting itself skiing on the mountain.

After a few years I stopped going and before I knew it I hadn't been for two years. Upon waking from sleep four days ago I knew I was going to ski that day. I did and guess what? It was the best skiing I have ever experienced. Effortlessly the interaction of mountain, snow, skis, and body, breath, and mind, presented a curving down the slope that was this moment. A little while later I started thinking about it, trying to come up with a strategy to recreate that effortless arcing through the pristine powder snow and, of course, I fell. Actually I slide halfway down the mountain on my back with a cloud of sparkling crystals around me fracturing the sunlight and manifesting rainbows of light. Self-image had started to try. It's everywhere. Getting in the way, causing problems. What to do?
Practise.

When knowing becomes a thought about knowing, obstruction is presenting itself and it is ready to be released.

And the Sutta continues:

> *And further, monks, in going forward, and in going back, complete knowing is realized. In looking ahead and looking behind, complete knowing is realized. Bending and stretching, complete knowing is realized. Carrying the robes and bowl, complete knowing is realized. In eating and drinking, chewing and tasting, complete knowing is realized. Excreting and urinating, complete knowing is realized. In motion and in stillness, in sitting, in sleeping and waking, in speech and silence, complete knowing is realized.*

Complete knowing is this moment. Knowing this moment completely is your life. Really. You may as well notice it.

Roshi said in the "Saturday Morning Dharma Talk" I quoted from at the beginning; "Each moment of breathing in is this moment. Each sound that is heard, each sensation that rises and falls is the activity, the turning of this moment. You and your world are arising here."

As we breathe in this sky in this moment together, whether we recognize it or not we are all present in this moment: here, there, everywhere. I realize I haven't even talked about alignment of breath, about great bows, about the moment of bowing together in Dokusan or a practice interview. Hmmmm, well..

Sit in the sky being breathed as this moment.
Move through the air being breathed as this moment.
See, hear, taste, touch, think, feel, breathe, as this moment.

When the gong strikes, signaling the end of the sitting round, you have another vivid opportunity to notice with the whole bodymind as the out breath returns to the sky, a pause, a sound, a feeling, the taste of breathing in this moment as this breath… turning…turning, noticing….

Effortless,

This easy and joyful practice.

Thank you for listening.