

BREATHE IN – BREATHE OUT

'If the breath is limited, life is limited.'

Patience is surely one of the names of God! For me, it has been one of the most difficult lessons to learn. All of us in the West suffer from the dreaded disease of expectation, which stems from an educational background geared to give us this disease. We have examinations to pass, grades to be numbered and counted, and a sense that there is a reward just around the corner for all of our hard work. Everyone knows perfectly well that money does not necessarily bring happiness, inner peace and contentment and yet our whole system is based on the acquisition of it. Today cultures can topple on the drop of the stock market. What a ridiculous situation! How then can we readjust our thinking in order to understand the path of transformation and our direct responsibility for it? It is a good question.

We breathe in only to breathe out. It is relatively easy to remember how to breathe in. We all love to breathe in the aroma of sweet perfumes or the smell of the ocean. We can breathe in the passion of the moment. We can visualise a colour and irradiate ourselves with it. We can breathe in strength and courage. We can sense the gentleness of a flower on the in-breath.

And there is also another aspect of the in-breath. If we are not awake, we may breathe in the results of our own negative emotions or thoughts and even share in those of others. We breathe in thoughts held in the moisture of the breath.

Let me explain it this way. We have seen that when we enter a room, we are all breathing the same air. If you could measure the air in the room before and after

a business meeting, for example, it would be different indeed. Certainly the atmosphere would have changed and the atmosphere comes from the moisture contained in the breath. The atmosphere in a church, a mosque or a temple normally has beautiful vibrations. People go to these places to pray, to ask, in humility, for what is needed. They praise God on the out-breath with their singing and chanting. They are not frightened to breathe out, filling their world with love and light. In an atmosphere that is filled with greed, there is endless talking and negotiating, but very little giving. Thus there is imbalance. It is so important to remember the out-breath. We are given so much in life, and it is on the breath that we can give away to our friends and to the very planet itself.

If you open your arms, first to the side, and then bring them up above your head, the hands touching, and finally bring them forward in an arc, the fingers touching and the arms extended in front of the centre of the chest, you have defined your own universe. In other words, your universe is within the extent of your armspan. Imagine your hands as being the extension of your heart centre so that you could stretch out and breathe through your hands as well as your nostrils! You could touch a beautiful leaf or a flower and in recognition of its beauty, breathe in. Then you could breathe out the essence of the beauty that you have breathed in, thus filling up your universe with love and light. You truly have something to give.

The trouble is that we find, if we are truly honest, that the vibrations on the out-breath do not travel very far, rarely as far as the extent of our own arm-span. It is as though we have been so stifled and repressed in our lives that the pain is somehow trapped. Yet, if we breathe in beauty, pain can be transformed and then the out-breath is pure, moving out into a waiting world.

What happens between the in-breath and the out-breath? The reality of the moment stands right in the middle of those two breaths and it is only when they are truly balanced that we can know what lies hidden there. If the two breaths are not balanced, that which wants so

desperately to be released remains imprisoned within our hearts. That is why the teaching of conscious breathing is so important. We can fill up our heads with conceptual thinking but the prison doors remain locked.

The first time I came upon this idea I was living in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan. I was young and perhaps that was why the importance of the balance of the two breaths did not mean enough to me so that I would really work to perfect the breath. Many years later I went on a retreat to another monastery, this time run by Tibetan Buddhists. I went with every expectation in the world, deciding I was definitely going to find an answer to my questions. We were told, when we arrived, that if we wanted an interview with the Lama, we must sign our name on a waiting list. We would then have twenty minutes of his valuable time. I signed up immediately, and a few days later I was told when I could see him.

I remember going into the Lama's room in a state that could be described as a mixture of expectation and sheer terror. He was sitting on a cushion and indicated that I was to sit opposite him. He spoke very little English, which did not make life any easier. I tried to explain my problems. He just looked and smiled, nodding frequently. I don't think he really understood a word, but it didn't seem to matter. Towards the end of the allotted twenty minutes he said, 'Very good. You breathe in only to breathe out. You start today, six hours please . . .' The interview was over.

I went back to my little room, trying to get used to the idea. I had come a long way and all I was told was that it was necessary to sit down and breathe for six solid hours every day. No further explanation was offered. I didn't even know what a lotus sitting position was, and of course there were no chairs in the meditation hall.

There were about twenty-five people staying in the Centre and, at that time, several visiting Lamas, who started chanting soon after 4.00 a.m., when we were all meant to get up and begin our meditations. I hadn't the slightest idea what they were chanting. There were a lot of bells and gongs which were struck at appropriate

moments. It was all very mysterious but after a few days I settled into the rhythm and things quietened down considerably.

Those six hours of breathing were still worrying me! Luckily I had been provided with a hard, round cushion to sit on and I knew that I was meant to keep my back as straight as possible. I plucked up courage and went down to the meditation hall. It was dark, lit only by candles. The air was thick with the smell of incense. In the gloom I could see about ten other people sitting and, presumably, breathing. It was very difficult not to feel self-conscious in such a situation.

I felt hopelessly naïve, but closing my eyes, I began. Breathe in. Breathe out! I cannot remember just how long I sat there that first day. I reckoned that it was all right to divide the six hours into sections. Anyway, my legs went to sleep, my back hurt and nothing happened at all. I do not know what I expected but whatever it was surely did not materialise. There were no bright lights, no flashes of understanding. There was, however, a lot of rumbling in the stomach area I remember, because the food was not to my taste at all.

I got through the first day and steeled myself to start all over again the next. Luckily there was one man I could talk to and we went for a walk that evening. He was equally English but had been working at this practice for some years. He was very courteous and patient with me and told me to persevere.

To cut a long story short, I persevered breathing in and breathing out for six hours a day for a whole week and then I asked to see the Lama again. This time there was a translator, which helped matters considerably. I tried to explain, as politely as possible, that I had breathed, that I found it impossibly difficult to remain awake, that thoughts kept crowding in from all sides and that so far nothing had happened! 'Ah-ha,' said the Lama. 'Very good. Now eight hours a day please.' The translator smiled, the Lama smiled and I tried to smile. Now it was to be eight hours of sitting in that same meditation hall, with a lot of silent people all around me

and that dreaded incense. Again I went back to my room to try to recover.

I will say that the next week was very different. Expectation had gone out of the window. In its place came utter and complete boredom! It is true that the breathing was becoming easier and the balance was better, but fitting eight hours into the day was a hard task indeed. The following week the Lama increased the time once more and that was when something started changing. I found myself as though hallucinating. It seemed that every fear and guilt I had ever had started to emerge. The fears manifested in physical pictures. I could swear there were snakes and tigers in the room. I was in a jungle. Finally I was so terrified I asked to see the Lama urgently. This time he looked even happier, smiling and nodding vehemently, when I explained the story to him. He then laughed out loud saying, 'Very good, very good! Continue!'

I did continue. Little by little the fears went and there was a dancing sensation in the breath. All the thought pictures disappeared as they were redeemed through the present moment, and I was beginning to get a taste of what it could mean to be on top of the breath. Time took on a totally different meaning. There were even moments when a flash of real understanding would come. When I saw the Lama in the passageway, he would bow and smile. I did not go to see him again. I knew for certain he had been right all along.