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# The Delight of Breathing

by Ruth Denison (edited by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt)

This article is based on Ruth Denison's keynote address at the recent Sensory Awareness Conference.

In one of my favorite quotes of the Buddha we hear him saying to his disciples: "As you breathe in, oh monks, breathe in with the whole body. As you breathe out, oh monks, breathe out with the whole body." This is from the Satipatthana Sutta (the teaching on the Foundations of Mindfulness). When I hear this, it always touches me so deeply because I know what that means. We are touched when we experience the truth of something and live it, when we know how much it is needed – and when we see the stupidity of us human beings seemingly incapable of grasping that truth.

So let's look at breathing in the light of the many similarities between Sensory Awareness, the Buddha Dharma and, in fact, many humanistic practices: one thing we have in common is that we don't teach anything. We don't – yet we do teach, but everybody already has what we teach. So, it's not a teaching, it is rather a confirmation of what is already in us. You recognize something in yourself and pull it out of your storage. For we all have it not willfully buried but we have forgotten it. And even if we learn new ways, open up, have great openings and we know how to do it - tomorrow we have forgotten it. It is a very strange malady we all suffer from. That is why the Buddha always repeated his teachings: Breathe in with your whole body. Breathe out with your whole body, and so on. It is a kind of sickness, this forgetfulness we all suffer from.

I invite you to this contemplation of breathing: Breath is with us all our life - isn't that a big revelation? Yeah, but to live this truthfully can move a lot in us. It's very simple. From our first inhalation to our last exhalation breath does not leave us, and if it does for more than a few moments we become anxious, for our life is at stake. When breath departs, as it inevitably does when we bid the world goodbye, with our final exhalation the life force departs as well. Without breath there can be no life. Any hindrance to it, any interference with its full natural expression, puts a limit on our experience in that moment.

Ordinarily, when we think of breath, we think of it as something we do and we have to make sure that we get enough and are sufficiently supplied with oxygen. In truth, however, breath is not something we do – as much of our practice is about not doing – it is something that is done to us (This may sound like a bad thing to many). Breath breathes us. You can

verify that. While we can thwart and manipulate its fullness, we can never totally, as long as our heart is beating, block this breathing. We can restrict it, we can do quite a lot but we cannot really block it as long as there is a heart beat. Both these processes are essential, but about the breath we can talk more for we have a direct access to it. It is always available and reminds us of its activity. Like the gravitational field of the earth, the rhythmic action of the breath is a force immeasurably more powerful than we are. We cannot breath it, it breathes us!

To really grasp that would bring many things in our lives into order; things we don't like, where we overstep, where we do a little bit too much - or not enough.

It is therefore much better that we offer our bodies now as channels for the breath's rhythmic play or interplay than to attempt to resist or restrict its mighty force. We don't do this consciously but through the ways we behave and relate to life. We restrict this force tremendously and have the sense we have control of it. Maybe we live without any awareness of this aspect. By sacrificing our willful holding, our habitual patterns (the fire of

our *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, in Buddhist terms) that keep the fullest expression of our breath contained, we directly align ourselves with the deepest, most powerful energies available to us.

Breath and body are two sides of the same coin and the condition of one directly affects the condition of the other. If the breath is shallow or constricted, sensations are weak and dull and indistinct, because we have no access to our life force. When the breath becomes full or fluid, or we can say deep, sensations become once again vibrant and present. By sensations I mean aliveness; we feel light, we feel vibrant and energetic. Breathing activates all this and it comes to us as experience, as sensation. It is a sensory experience, a tactile experience. It is important that what the breath does is not just breathing air. It is an active force coming in with motion and touching us. Not that we cannot activate sensations by scratching and massage and all, but when breath comes in, it activates that which we are on a very cellular level.

We are energy, or the interplay, on one level, of the classical elements. For example, I got up this morning and complained: 'it's so cold, so cold,' until I realized: well, this is the element of fire at play. Why do I complain? I am in a place where it is cold. Now, why do I use up my language and my



Breath is the food on which sensations live.

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### For Charlotte

Don't use your eyes like forks,  
Charlotte used to say,  
wisely sweeping past  
one hundred years to stir  
a century and more  
in her probing,  
sensitive hands.

Through her, my eyes became bowls  
and the world, food.  
There is no need for utensils  
when there's nothing to pick apart.

Poem by Cathy Edget

tives. But there is some truth in this. In traditional mindfulness practices, breath is presented as the preeminent object on which to focus our attention. For 2,600 years the Buddha's teachings – and other teachings, the Hindus were very advanced too – have been focusing their attention on breathing. Breath and sensations, these oceanic forces, hammer away at the flimsy breakwaters of our resistance. The posture of meditation turns the body into a channel or conduit through which these forces can run freely. Breathing is a joyous and precious event, therefore. It is here for the taking, free to all of us that have a hunger for nourishment. Every breath you take could be a joyous act, a deep surrender to the mystery of life in all its



Jill Harris: Sensory Awareness / Political Awareness: Hello?

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energy because it is cold? Then I could laugh about myself. When we laugh about ourselves, we have much more fun and we can master our lives. This is right understanding. If you get this right away, you have the best medicine against suffering.

Back to the breath: Breath is the food on which sensations live – on which aliveness lives. When the sensations are fed they come out of their dullness. It's not simply the air, it is the force of movement. Breath is the switch that turns on the lights of the sensations. When they come to life, they flicker and they shine, just like the stars at night. Now, you can be a romantic about it. I hate it actually. We get so quickly into these superla-



Richard Lowe: Artful Practice - Integrating Sensing and Daily Life.

potency and force. Let breath become an act of surrender to the urgency of the life force just as giving the weight of our body and mind is an act of surrender to the potent pull of gravity. You don't have to force deep and full breathing to activate an awareness of the whole body. All you need to do is surrender to this most powerful bellows. Breath wants you. Breath wants to breathe you.

Rejoice in coming to your breath and allowing it to touch you all the way through. When it is not interfered with a thought or with any comment, when it is left alone in its natural rhythm, then you are in good hands and you are sure to attain and actualize the dream of your lifetime.

Ruth Denison was the first Buddhist teacher to lead an all-women's retreat. She was a student of Charlotte Selver and hosted Charlotte's first workshops in California in the late 50s and early 60s. Ruth was also the first teacher to use movement and dance to instruct her students in mindfulness. At 85 years old she still leads retreats in many places and runs Dharma Dena Meditation Center in the Mojave desert of California. For more about Ruth Denison, see our Fall 2005 newsletter.