

Text from the Tradition: A Taste of Water by Chwen Jiuan Lee and Thomas Hand

(text drawn from pp.192-197) *From Breath to Stirring of the Heart*

No other human action is so favored by spiritual masters of the East as breathing. All eastern systems of spiritual practice use it as an essential element. As always, we start with relaxation. As you begin meditation, you relax your body with only enough nerve and muscle tension to maintain the meditation posture you have chosen. This relaxation is of the greatest practical importance because, in effect, it is a physical letting go of everything else but quiet sitting. It is a bodily commitment to this here and now sitting. Physical relaxation has an immediate effect on one's whole human composite. It is especially effective in reducing psychological resistance to that energy flow which advances our consciousness. But there is one physical movement you cannot stop, breathing, so let this be your point of attention. The path of mindfulness is always the path of simplification. This means not only that the activity one chooses to focus on is this here and now single type of action (breathing), but also this *one* act of breathing, forgetting the ones past and the ones to come.

Another feature of this simple attention is that it puts aside all thought of purpose and goal. Even the devotional thought of doing this for Jesus has no place once you move into the practice itself. Of course you are being mindful of your breathing in order to advance along the evolutionary course to Christ consciousness. There is no need to deny this at all. But also, there is no need to think about it or to consciously intend it as you sit. On the contrary, such thoughts are just as corrosive of the bare attention you are practicing as the thought of the date you have set up for later in the day. The thought of other, lesser, but not wrong motives must also go—motives like success, desire for spiritual experience, the esteem of your teacher. Single mindedness is so free from the thought of any motive that if, while you are in deep meditation, a person were to ask you, “what are you doing?” you would easily answer, “I’m watching my breath,” but if the person continued, “what are you doing that for?” you would stare blankly and just reply, “watching my breath to watch my breath.” Feelings of like and dislike must be quietly suppressed. All judgments too, and comparisons are out: “This is great,” “This is stupid,” “This is better than yesterday,” “I’m not getting anywhere,” etc., etc. Your mind is not to be preoccupied or concerned with any such ideas. Actually, the only thing that is happening is the breath flowing in, flowing out right now. This is your life.

Suppose now that you are moving into a state of bare attention, single-mindedness, what will happen? What are the signs that this is advancing you toward full life, toward perfect being/awareness? The first thing that you might feel, as very many do, is a letting down of your burden. The anxieties, fears, concerns, tensions, and stress are gone. They are no longer a part of your life right now. This is in itself a very great step and quite difficult for so many. It implies a real dying to the separate ego because your burden is all ego-created. A very great step indeed. Another experience that soon arises is a sense of being in contact with reality and of being at home. You might feel like saying to yourself, “This is it! This is life!”

As you become more proficient in bare attention, you will begin to be more and more conscious of the “stirring of the heart.” The heart here refers to the spirit within us, the power of infinite consciousness and the

potential to be in a myriad of forms. It is the power by which we experience “God.” This life force is released by our bare attention to any particular human manifestation of it—in this case breathing. It is the stirring of the heart that makes everything, in the broad sense of the word, prayer. Without it nothing is really prayer.

Also to be noted, is that this stirring is a sign of a believing heart. The whole practice of mindfulness in any form starts with faith that this action is life itself and can be a door of divine discovery. At this stage in the mindfulness path because you are touching the very life process itself, each breath becomes infinitely precious. Nothing else is important. A dignity, even a grandeur, enters into your act of breathing that is a sign of the ever ancient, ever rhythmic movement of life itself. At this stage one is beginning to taste what Saint Paul means when he says that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. All that you have done from the initial body relaxation to the letting go of all judgments is oriented toward the stirring of the heart. Once it occurs in a fully conscious way you must be especially careful not to let in self-centered thoughts about how well you are doing, how you would like to share this with others, how much you enjoy this and want to maintain it and such. Just stay with the bare attention to this breath, to this breath, to... There is still great advancement to be made.

As a final note on the stirring we should mention that the full phrase from the *Cloud of Unknowing* is “the naked stirring of the heart” The author means that in the type of meditation he is teaching the stirring is not clothed in any words, images or even actions, like breathing. All these are put into a “cloud of forgetting.” It is pure attention with no object at all. We can call it no thing attention. This is just sitting without any real object. It is often taken up after some proficiency is reached in breathing attention. If a person after some time of following the breath feels drawn to this even more simplified practice it is certainly excellent and most highly recommended.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Note: because this text is already so practical, no additional teaching is offered here.

Questions for Reflection:

- Thomas Keating categorizes “thoughts” into five categories: wandering thoughts, emotionally-laden thoughts, insights and psychological break-through thoughts, self-reflective thoughts, and unloading of the conscious thoughts: what do you notice about your own patterns of encounter with thoughts during prayer?
- What do you notice about the patterns of your meditation over time or during varied seasons of your life?