

ANAPANASATI - WHY LONG BREATH ?

(by Santikaro Bhikkhu)

Why did the Buddha list the long breathing (“lesson 1”) before the short breathing (“lesson 2”)? This doesn’t fit my experience? Is it unnatural to force myself to breathe long?

- ∅ “Long breathing” means the deep breathing that comes naturally when we are healthy and sitting quietly, with bodies relaxed and minds at peace. (That many people don’t often experience this says more about our lifestyles than about the Buddha’s teaching.) Long breathing fills the lungs comfortably without straining, first with the abdomen expanding and then, as the upper lungs fill, the chest more fully expands, in turn pulling the abdomen up and taut. (The details for each person depend on muscle tone & extent of fat deposits.) This is considered “normal” (*pakati*), which may not make sense to modern readers, but it did to most of the Buddha’s audience, as well as experienced yogis throughout the ages.
- ∅ If one sits meditation after a good session of Qi Gong or Yoga Asana, one will most likely start off with long breathing. You can get similar results by doing *ānāpānasati* while walking until the breath is relaxed and deep.
- ∅ While long breathing was normal for most of the nuns in the Buddha’s time, as well as Thai peasants until relatively recently, it doesn’t appear so to many people today who are out-of-shape, busy, stressed out, etc. Again, the problem may be one of lifestyle more than the teaching. (I mention this because some people have assumed the Sutta must be wrong “because it doesn’t fit my experience.” If we accept that our experience is still rather limited, the Sutta may turn out to be “right enough” later.)
- ∅ Anyway, it’s fine to start with short breathing if that is what the breathing is doing. By sitting still, relaxing, letting go, quieting the mind, etc., the breathing will gradually become deeper and longer by itself. That will lead you into long breathing by and by. The order of lessons 1 and 2 are not a major issued to be carved in marble. After all, the point of the first two lessons is to get to know (*janati*) a wide range of different kinds of breath. “Long” and “short” represent a gamut of different combinations of deep, shallow, fast, slow, coarse, refined, relaxed, tense, etc.
- ∅ You can also experiment with gently — very, very gently for those who tend to be impatient and want quick results — deepening the breath with conscious intention. (Please don’t think that intention is somehow bad or wrong.)
- ∅ I beg to differ with all the modern writers who insist on “breathing naturally.” There is often a good deal of confusion about what “natural” means. In the USA, we use the term “nature” and its derivatives with a rather different meaning than Buddhist tradition. This is one area where learning more about the tradition would be a good restraint on our habit to Americanize everything.
- ∅ I think that there is a common error nowadays that comes with labeling things “natural.” This is partly due to the rampant materialism of our culture & education systems, & to the self-indulgence of modern individualism. This mistake is to think of many things as “natural” => “good” => “go for it, indulge it, or whatever you like” w/o looking into matters carefully. This is common enough that the advertising and

marketing people manipulate us by labeling their products “natural,” as if that in itself makes them good and wholesome. “Natural” isn’t necessarily “good” or desirable; after all, cancer, killing, meat eating, and many other things that we choose not to do are natural on the biological side of things. Our culture assumes that the material or biological is the starting point of everything; Buddhism cannot agree. So we ought to ask questions and investigate further whenever we hear or think about “natural breathing.” Otherwise, we may end up with superficial assumptions about the breathing.

- ☞ You *may* sometimes want to intentionally deepen, slow, relax, etc. the breathing. This *can* be beneficial, when done with care, common sense, and intelligence. Find out for yourself how to do it without running roughshod over your body’s mechanisms (autonomous nervous system). Learn how to do it and the result will be satisfying. Force it out of impatience or controlling habits and the result will be tense, unpleasant, etc.
- ☞ Again, Dhamma practice is more about skilful use of intention than pretending one has no intentions. In other words, learn the difference between right aspiration (*sammā-sankappa*, the second factor of the path) and wrong aspiration (*micchā-sankappa*, more like craving). One directs the mind skillfully according to right understanding; the other is motivation by positive & negative reactivity.
- ☞ The reason, I take it, that many teachers emphasize the so-called “natural breathing” is to avoid people taking a particular kind of breathing as their goal & hence practicing with desire, or judging their breathing and themselves, or falling into control habits. Such a motivation is laudable. However, our minds choose targets and desire to get to them despite such warnings. Dhamma practice is not so much about goals as how to direct our minds without craving & clinging. There is an important difference between distinguishing long from short or coarse from refined, and judging some breathes as “good” and others as “bad.” It would be a shame if “breathing naturally” meant not distinguishing the subtle differences that occur.
- ☞ Most of us have deeply engrained control habits; call them defense mechanisms or whatever. Practice is about relinquishing such control as we become aware of it. Often, we are controlling the breathing without knowing it due to such habits. Best not to pretend our breathing is “natural.” Watch it & study it as it is. Furthermore, one reason the breathing is such a skilful object for meditation is that it responds quickly and subtly to changes in the body-mind. Control the breath more & it will change. Control it less & it will change. Control it in more subtle ways & it will change.
- ☞ If one is a brute, one will force things. (I confess to having been brutish, at times, in my practice.) This is far, however, from a forgone conclusion. Use common sense intelligence.
- ☞ Take it easy. Have fun. Watch & learn. Let go.
- ☞ And don’t believe anybody — including your own opinions — too much.