

## SOME NOTES ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF BREATHING

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### I

In her book *Between East and West* the French philosopher Luce Irigaray draws our attention to the fact, that we westerners are unaware of our breathing and its possibilities. She herself has practised Indian yoga and become aware of the eastern traditions where "the body can become spirit through the cultivation of the body" (p.7). In the West we forget this first and last gesture of life. There are two ways of breathing: cultivating it or forgetting it. This is an essential difference between western and eastern traditions. In the west we are used to transcend breathing in the same way as we are used to transcend the body. In the culture of body-mind dualism the connection between cultivating the breathing and cultivating the spirit is not recognized. We have also forgotten the roots of our Christian tradition, where God breathed life into the first man and where the son of God had to become flesh and blood to save Mankind.

In her book Irigaray describes this forgetfulness, but also another way in which we can reawaken our whole being to another kind of life, where "the body is reawakened through a spiritualization of the body" (p 12) . In the traditions of the East this means cultivating the breathing. It is a daily process, which can "connect the body to the universe", as Irigaray writes. This is a slow process possibly lasting throughout life. It means a conscious cultivation of the breathing, a kind of caring as a baby is taken care of - silence. Irigaray finds this way of thinking in the Christian tradition, too, where the body is seen as a temple, but the question is, how to develop this experience in oneself and the understanding based thereon. One possible answer is: by conscious breathing.

### II

To understand this, we have to look more closely at our experience and especially the experience of our lived body and observe its many centres or poles. Our ego-consciousness, its experiential centre, is located in the area of the head and neck where the sense organs of the external senses and speech organs are situated. This is easily demonstrated. If you close your eyes and think of giving a speech. You can feel the site of the speech, your thoughts, in the same place at which you would feel

it if you were actually speaking: the seat of speech is located somewhere in the head and especially in the area of the speech organs. You can also imagine seeing or listening to something. The site of looking and listening is perceived in the area of the head, too. You may try to close your eyes and look at your body in your mind's eye. You will see that the angle, the perspective is downwards. The looking subject is located somewhere in the region of the head, behind the eyes. But if you now try to reach what is looking or listening, you will see that you find nothing.

The cultivation of conscious breathing is a key method to explore the inner space of the body. Breathing is usually an unconscious function that can be brought under conscious control. Normally we transcend our breathing and our whole body. But we can, if we wish, focus our attention on our breathing so that the act of breathing becomes the centre of our consciousness. When this happens, it means that our ego-logical centre is moved to the periphery. When you breathe in you can feel how the centre of your body expands and when you breathe out, you can feel it contract. If you continue to observe your breathing for a longer time you will observe, how the rhythm of your breathing slows down and all of its phases become longer. Little by little you will become aware that the centre point of your inner space is the same as the centre point of the breath, which is located somewhere in the abdominal area.

Actually the inner space of the body appears to have two poles or centres: on one the hand there is the association stream of thought, which is located in the inner space somewhere up in the area of the head; on the other hand there is the centre point of breathing, which is located somewhere in the abdominal area. We can say roughly that we identify ourselves with one centre or the other, depending on our culture, experience and practice. There is a different quality between these two ways or styles of experiencing our self. If we identify ourselves to our "ego-logical" self, we experience our body very much as a "head-body". We live most of our time in rational thinking, in images, memories, plans. Our body remains on the periphery. This insensitivity in most parts of our bodies greatly influences the manner in which we support or take care of our bodies. I believe this is a strongly western structure of the body experience. We live in a culture that emphasizes rationality and calculative thinking. Our culture is also the culture of the gaze or eyes. The place of the experiencing subject in the internal space is then shifted to the area of the head. The metaphor of "a talking head" expresses well this basic experience of western man.

But there is another way, another style of experiencing the self revealed by the practice of breathing. By cultivating conscious breathing we can learn to move the focus of our consciousness inside the inner space of our body. In this way we learn to explore its centres and limits. We can expand our body consciousness to govern new areas in our body and become more sensitive to its various qualities. We can even expand our body consciousness through the skin of our objective body, because the limits of our inner space are not objective but experiential. There are many breathing exercises where you are advised to "breathe with the whole body" and in this way blur the border between the inner space of the body and the external space. The cultivation of conscious breathing offers us the experience of the centre of the inner

space of our bodies and this centre can be experienced as a centre or starting point of all action - including thinking. But this thinking is different. It can be called "meditative thinking" or "intuitive thinking" because it emanates from silence. The experience of this centre is also connected to willpower, vitality, the principle of life, the acceptance of a mystery.

### III

I have adopted the concept of "the contemplative body" to describe the experience of the body that is trained, opened and made sensitive by conscious breathing. I have already described how the experiential centre of this body is the same as the centre of breathing. This centre, called *hara* in Japanese, will reveal itself as a psycho-physical centre, to which the practitioner can anchor his whole being and action. In the Japanese tradition there is a special sensitivity to this center and a knowledge of how it is cultivated. For example, there are certain zen- arts where the cultivation of the breathing plays a central role. This is true especially in the martial arts, called budo. I would sum up the meaning and role of conscious breathing and its cultivation in these arts in the following four points:

1. Breathing is an expression of the basic rhythm of life. When it is opened and made conscious it will make us sensitive and increase the life force (*ki*) in us. The concept of life force or *ki* is complicated, and no details can be presented here. In any case my position is that it can be interpreted through the concept of body consciousness and sensitivity. In buddhism they refer to the life principle, which can be felt in the body.

2. The conscious breathing is a basic technique to focus the stream of consciousness on one point and make it to halt. The idea is: when the breathing stops, the mind stops. By controlling the breathing different states of mind can be controlled and the mind can even be emptied of any contents. Conversely, different states of mind can be seen in the rhythm of breathing.

3. The third point is a practical one. Strong, conscious breathing functions as a basic motor of the so-called "internal strength", important especially for the martial arts. This is based on the experience that the breathing carries all movement in the same way as the heart carries the circulation of the blood. The practice of breathing teaches the opening and closing movements of the whole body which are the basic elements of internal strength.

4. Strong, conscious breathing opens in us an awareness of "the centre". In budo it is connected to the correct execution of a technique and the use of the voice, both of which originate from this centre. In a wider perspective it means using the whole personality to support all behaviour.

## IV

From the point of view of Zen Buddhism the cultivation of the breathing means an effort to answer the basic question: who am I, what is my real self? In Zen culture this "real self" is located physically in the area of the abdomen, in the *hara*. And if you try to connect with the *hara* through practise, it means that you are looking for your "true self". In Zen culture the discourse about the centre points to the meeting place of mind and body, because man is seen to consist of one reality, not two. And the conscious breathing is the basic method to show this place to the practitioner.

In Rinzai-zen the practice of breathing is connected to the method of solving so-called *koans*. *Koans* are one kind of riddles that the master sets the pupil and the pupil is expected to evince an answer to it during the private meetings. The first *koan* is considered to be the most important one. It is called "an eye opener" to the true self. The most common *koan* that is used is a *koan* called "Joshu's Mu". This *koan* goes as follows: "A monk asked Joshu: 'Does a dog have the Buddha nature? Joshu answered: 'Mu'." And that's it. "Mu" is a Japanese word meaning emptiness, but the master usually emphasises that in this *koan* it should not be understood as such. The master usually instructs the student to just become one with mu. It usually takes several years before the student finds the right way to answer this *koan*. But what happens in this process and what kind of answer can be accepted by the master? In a way the answer is simple: the pupil learns to give the answer from the *hara*, from the centre of his whole personality. At first the pupil tries to approach the *koan* in a rational way. He looks for different rational answers. In this phase he lives very strongly in his rational ego. He tries to solve the *koan* as if it were a logical problem. When he then comes to meet the master privately, none of his answers are accepted. Little by little - and it can take years - he will exhaust all his intellectual powers on the problem, he will find himself in a kind of a intellectual knot where his mind will finally be empty of all intellectual effort. His ego-consciousness, his head will empty and his experience will move increasingly to the area of breathing, to the *hara*. When his mind is empty of all intellectual effort and he lets the problem rest in his centre, in his breathing, an intuitive insight may emerge. But the origin of this insight - and this is most important - is now his *hara*, the psycho-physical centre, which is also the seat of his "true self". If the answer to the *koan* does not emerge from the physical and mental centre, it will never be accepted. To finally reach the level of acting exclusively from this centre, from the true self, and never lose it - from the viewpoint of Zen - may take the your whole life.

To sum up - the *koan* system of Rinzai-zen is a method about a thousand years old to investigate the difference between what I have called "head thinking" and "belly thinking". Not all questions are solved by rational thinking. There are plenty of questions, especially many questions concerning human existence, whose solutions require other types of thinking. Martin Heidegger writes about the same thing in his book *Gelassenheit*. He differentiates between what he calls "calculative thinking" and "meditative thinking". Calculative thinking refers to the kind of representational

thinking the centre of which is the ego and the site is the head. It is thinking that is never still, as Heidegger writes. We can verify its location by listening to our continuous inner monologues. But there is another site, the site of stillness, which is the site of meditative thinking. We can plant a problem in this place like a seed and just stay with it, silently, breathing with it. In this way we can make room for a spontaneous, intuitive insight that is rooted to our whole personality. This insight is rooted in our experience of our contemplative body, where we live near the stream of life. The answer that this kind of inquiry produces cannot be separated from our existence, vice versa, it is necessarily connected to our experience of our place in the world and as part of the world. We can gain entrance to all these experiences by conscious breathing.

Literature:

Irigaray, Luce: *Between East and West*. Columbia University Press: New York 2002.  
Heidegger, Martin: *Gelassenheit*. Neske: Tübingen (Neunte Auflage) 1988.