

On the Path of the Breath

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Once the Buddha was extolling the advantages of breath meditation, the benefits that could be derived from keeping the breath in mind, and one of the monks said, "I already do breath meditation." So the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" And the monk replied, "I sit breathing, putting away any desires for the past or future, and any irritation in the present moment"—i.e., developing a sense of equanimity for what's arising and passing away right here and now. And that was it: That was his method. The Buddha responded, "Well, that *is* a form of breath meditation. I don't say that it's not, but that's not how you get the most benefit out of the breath."

So he proceeded to teach breath meditation in a much fuller way. And it's important to look carefully at how the Buddha taught breath meditation, because you begin to realize how proactive his method was. You also realize that many of the steps contained in his method are more like questions. He said, "Do this," but without fully explaining how you might go about doing it, which means that you have to test and explore.

The first two steps are exercises for gaining practice in discerning the breath—discerning when it's long, discerning when it's short—to help sensitize you to how the breath feels. When you do that, you begin to notice which kind of breathing feels best. He simply mentions long or short, but there are other qualities you can look for as well: deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. In other words, you want to get in touch with the physical sensations of the breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel the sensation of breathing? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? The Buddha doesn't say that you have to focus on any particular point. He simply says, "Bring mindfulness to the fore." In other words, be very clear about what you're keeping in mind, which is the meaning of mindfulness. To have a purpose in mind, what you're planning to do, and then your ability to remember that: That's mindfulness. As for actually watching what's going on, that's called alertness. You need both qualities, but it helps to know which is which.

Because the Buddha doesn't say where in the body you have to focus, you can ask yourself, when you breathe in, where you actually feel it. Put aside your preconceived notions of where you *should* be feeling it: Where do you actually feel the breath? Where is it comfortable; where is it uncomfortable? From those steps in learning how to sensitize yourself to the breathing, the Buddha then

moves on to a whole series of trainings in which you have to learn how to do something. You *will* something to happen.

This is where the breath meditation gets more proactive. The first training—which is the third step—is to learn how to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. In other words, you try to create an expansive state of mind. You're conscious of the breath but you're also trying to be aware of the body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. The question is: How do you do that? Some people find it very easy to go straight to the whole body. Other people have to work gradually up to it. One way of doing that is to go through the body section by section, noticing how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, how they feel as you breathe out. And to help yourself along, you might try making the breath more comfortable wherever you focus. For example, as you focus on the back of the neck, notice: Is there tension there? When you breathe in do you build up tension there? When you breathe out are you holding on to tension? What can you do to relax it?

This is actually moving into the fourth step, which is to calm what's called "bodily fabrication": the effect of breath on the sensation of the body. But you can combine the two steps. As you go through the body, working up to this full body awareness, you can also learn how to calm the breath so that the sensation of breathing feels good. You begin to realize that the breathing is not just a process that you feel in one or two points in the body. The entire body is involved in the breathing process, or it *can* be involved in the breathing process. The more it becomes a whole-body process, the more refreshing it feels.

This moves on to steps five and six: training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of refreshment, with a sense of ease and pleasure. You build up to these steps as you try to find which rhythm of breathing is best for each part of the body until you're ready to settle down at one spot. Then think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. Then you go back again and follow the strict order of the steps, which is, once you're aware of the whole body, to allow the sensations of the breathing to calm down.

You begin to notice that your ideas about the breath will have an effect on how calm it can get. You can perceive the breath in different ways. For instance, you can hold in mind the perception that it's a whole-body process. Think of the breath coming in and out every pore of the skin. And there is oxygen exchange happening at the skin. The more wide open your pores, the more oxygen gets exchanged. If you think of the skin as being wide open, the muscles of the rib cage can do less work. Just make the mind still and hold that perception in place: The breath can come in and go out from any direction through all the parts of your body, all the pores of your skin. It all connects on its own, without your having to massage it through the body.

You'll notice that there are subtle sensations in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, that correspond to the grosser sensations of the movement of the rib cage, the movement of the diaphragm. Allow those subtle sensations to blend together in a way that feels harmonious. Think of every part of the body being connected, all the energy channels in the body being connected, so that the breath energy spreads through them instantly and automatically, independently of the in-and-out breath, without your having to do anything to breathe it in or out. Here you're using one of the aggregates, the aggregate of perception, to help calm the breath down. And you notice that it does also induce a sense of *piti*, which is usually translated as "rapture," although in some cases it's not quite as strong as what we would ordinarily call "rapture." It's more a sense of refreshment. The body feels full, satisfied. It's as if every little cell in the body is getting to breathe to its heart's content, and is not getting squeezed by the other cells in the process. A sense of ease will come along with this. Once the body has been really refreshed in this way, things will begin to calm down even further.

This is where you get sensitive to what the Buddha calls mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. You've already noticed that changing the perception of how you breathe will have an effect on the breathing process and the feelings that arise from the breathing process. It also has an effect on the mind. It calms things down. So you can continue exploring exactly which perceptions help to calm the mind down even further.

What you're doing here is learning both calm and insight at the same time. The Buddha never treats these two qualities of mind as diametrically opposed. He points out that they can develop separately, but ideally they should be working together. As you calm things down mindfully, you at the same time gain insight into the workings of the mind. Here you begin to see, on the one hand, the impact the breathing can have on the mind. The more soothing the breath becomes, the more the mind is willing to settle down in the present and feel soothed by it. At the same time, you see the impact of the mind on the breath. The way you perceive the breath is going to change the way the body actually breathes. Your mental picture of the breath, of the breathing process, will have an impact on which parts of the body actually get involved in the breathing process.

As things grow more and more calm, they lead to a point where you can sit here just looking at awareness—the awareness of the mind itself as it's watching the breath. This is an important ability in the meditation: learning how to observe the mind. It's almost as if there are two minds: the mind being observed and the mind doing the observing. You can watch the state of the mind as it stays with the breath. Then you begin to notice that sometimes it's steady and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it can maintain its concentration; sometimes it can't.

Sometimes it feels refreshed and gladdened by doing the meditation; other times it feels like the meditation is more of a chore, when you're just going through the motions. You want to learn how to read your mind in this way. Once you can read it, you can then learn to provide it with whatever it needs.

For instance, how do you gladden the mind when it's feeling a little bit down, a little bit bored by the process? What can you do to make it more interesting? The analogy the Buddha gives is of an intelligent cook working in the palace for a prince. Now to get to be a cook working for a prince, you have to be sensitive to what the prince likes. The prince isn't going to come down to the kitchen and say, "Hey, buddy, tomorrow I'd like fried chicken," or "Tomorrow I'd like tofu." The prince will sit there at his table and he'll reach for this food and not reach for that food, take a lot of this and take only a little bit of that. So you've got to notice that. You have to pick up on the signs the prince is sending. Whether he's sending them consciously or not, you want to notice them. And then, when you can read his signs, you can anticipate his wants every day.

As King Asoka once said in one of his edicts that if the people who worked for him were going to please him, they had to know what he wanted even before he knew. You have to learn how to be that quick at reading your own mind. What does the mind need right now? What is it going to need with the next breath? Sometimes it gets bored with the breath, so you can give it other things to think about. You can develop qualities of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. All of these are valid topics of meditation. They're there to inspire the mind, to gladden the heart. You can think about the good times you've been generous in the past, when you didn't really have to share something but you felt moved to share. Or of the times you could have gotten away with harming somebody or taking something away from them, but you didn't. Think about those times. They help bring joy to the practice. In other words, like the cook, you learn how to read your mind and then provide it with whatever food it needs.

The same with the issue of steadying the mind: When the mind is feeling kind of wobbly, how do you get it fully and firmly fixed here in the present moment? You might want to go back and review some of the steps in the meditation: Which ones are you forgetting? Have you forgotten to stay with the whole body? Have you forgotten how to give rise to a sense of rapture, refreshment? Well, go back and do those things. Or you might be able to change the way you perceive the breathing. Think of the breath going down into your bones. Focus on the breathing sensations in your hands and feet. Some people find that focusing on one spot at a time is not enough to keep them really transfixed, so give yourself two spots.

I knew an old woman in Thailand when I was first getting involved in meditation. She was a retired schoolteacher and she said that one of the quickest ways of getting the mind to settle down and stay really focused in the present moment was to focus on the sensations in the head and the sensations at the base of the spine at the same time. Think of those as two breathing centers. And you may find that the effort involved in keeping two things going at once—thinking of a line connecting the two to make it a single sensation—really steadies the mind, focuses it, gets it to settle down and stay still.

The next step the Buddha recommends is learning how to release the mind. Here he's not talking about the ultimate release, but simply about how you refine your concentration. One of the important ways of gaining insight while you're in the process of developing concentration is to be able to notice the differences among the various levels of concentration as you go through them. Sometimes you settle down and you're still sort of hovering around the breath as you try to adjust it. Other times you can let yourself simply dive into the breath, to be bathed by the breathing, without having to analyze much at all. What you've done is that you've moved from using directed thought and evaluation to help with the concentration to the point where you don't need them anymore. You can let them go. There's a much greater sense of refreshment that comes, a greater sense of fullness, as you're one with the breath as opposed to hovering protectively outside. That's one way of releasing the mind. Then you can compare which state is more easeful, which state has more stress. And then again you can provide the mind with what it needs.

Once you've learned these ways of dealing with the breath, the workings of your mind become a lot more transparent, just as the breath element in the body becomes more transparent. That's when you're ready to take the work of insight even deeper, seeing the inconstancy of anything that's intended, whether it's physical or mental—anything that's fabricated in any way at all, whether it's a bodily fabrication or a mental fabrication. No matter how easeful and refreshing and stable the mind in concentration may be, there's still a slight instability, a slight wavering you can detect. And as the mind develops a sense of dispassion for everything intentional, it grows disenchanted. It's had enough of this. That's when it's really ready to let go—i.e., it loses interest in fabricating these fabrications, and so they stop. That's when everything gets relinquished, including the path.

This is how you can get great benefit, great rewards out of the practice of breath meditation. It's not simply a means for calming the mind down. The breath itself becomes a way of understanding the process of fabrication in both body and mind. And it ultimately allows you to develop a sense of dispassion, not because you come into the meditation with a negative attitude, but because

you've learned how to outgrow the exercises that the Buddha has set out for you. It's like a child outgrowing a game. You've played the game enough so that you know everything the game has to offer. You've mastered all the challenges and are ready for something more. So the dispassion here is more like the dispassion that happens when you naturally grow up, when you mature. It's the dispassion that comes when you realize there must be something better.

You sometimes hear that the point of meditation is to learn simply to accept things as they are and not to be too demanding of what you need to be happy. That principle works on an outside level, teaching contentment with your external situation, but it doesn't work on the inside level. The Buddha said that he gained Awakening by *not* resting content with the state of his mind. On the inner level, he said to notice what things can provide what level of happiness, and to see how far you can push this process of fabrication. Because that's what you're doing as you breathe in this way: You're exploring the potentials for bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication to see how far they can go. Once you've explored their limits, you want something better. You realize that you can't look to fabrication, to these acts of intention, for true happiness any further. You've got to go deeper. You've got to learn how to abandon even these skillful intentions.

What this means is that you maintain a high standard for what it means to be happy. In fact, you heighten your standards for what's going to count as true happiness as you grow in the practice. You begin to realize that in the past you've been looking in the wrong place. You've been settling for a crude and unreliable happiness. You've been looking for all your happiness in things that are fabricated. Is it possible for there to be happiness in something totally unfabricated, totally unintended? You look for that—something that lies even beyond the intentions of equanimity, the intentions of calm or stillness, the intentions of insight. You can't get to that level without having developed these other skills, because these are the skills that refine your powers of awareness. They're not taking you to a place that you could create, which is what you've been doing all along, but they *are* taking you to a dimension you couldn't have found without having created the creations. The act of creation sensitizes you, and as you get more refined in your skill, it clears away a lot of the static in your experience of the present. It sensitizes you to very, very subtle things.

It's like tuning in on a radio. The more sensitive your ear, the more you can tell whether you're tuned into the radio station very precisely or you're off a little bit. If you're off a little bit, there's going to be static, interference. So you keep tuning in, tuning in, as your ear gets better and better. You don't want even the least little bit of static. And that's how you get right on target.

This is how the breath leads you all the way to nibbana. Of course the breath doesn't do that itself. But if you follow the Buddha's steps, learning how to master the steps he recommends for you to experiment and explore, the breath does become a path. It's a path happening right here all the time. So try to take advantage of what's right here and see how far you can go.