

Your Main Foundation

November 21, 2011

When you focus on the breath, you've got all four frames of reference right here. The breath is a manifestation of the body. Then there are feelings. Feelings can either be physical or mental. They come basically down to pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. Then you've got mind states, such as a mind that's impassioned, a mind that's not impassioned, a mind that's aversive or not. This analysis of mind states works its way up to more subtle things, like a mind that's concentrated or not, or a mind that has reached a state beyond which it has ever been before or not. Those deal with more refined states of concentration. And then finally there are mental qualities, things that get in the way of your concentration like the hindrances, or things that help your concentration, like the factors for awakening.

Often it's hard to make clear distinctions among these things, especially on the mental side. For example, with mental feelings: The feeling part of the mental feeling is the feeling tone, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But rarely do we have feelings that are simply positive, or negative, or neutral. We have stories that go along with them and color the particular feeling. Those stories come from perception and fabrication in the mind, which gets you more into the framework of mind states or mental qualities.

Also, the line between mind states and mental qualities is very hard to pin down. You might think of the mind state as being when the whole mental committee has agreed on something, whereas the mental qualities are the specific members of the committee.

The clearest line is between bodily phenomena and mental phenomena, and that's an important distinction to focus on. You've got the breath coming in and going out, and then you've got the mind here, liking and disliking, making up all kinds of stories, and then reacting to those stories one way or another: either seeing a story as really fascinating and wanting to follow through with it, or realizing that it's not a very skillful story and learning how to separate yourself out from it. That's one of the ways in which these different ways of analyzing mental phenomena are helpful. When you can see mental phenomena simply as mental phenomena, and not as a world that you've got to enter into or one that you've got to believe, that gives you a certain measure of safety right there, a certain amount of protection, the ability to pull yourself out.

This is where the body is helpful. When you can stay with the sensation of the body, that helps to prevent you from getting totally wrapped up in a particular mind state. Think of the fact that you've got breath here, you've got the different elements: earth, water, fire, that you feel as solidity, liquidity, warmth. If you keep these as your frame of reference, it helps keep you from being sucked into the other frames of reference, or helps you see them as frames of reference rather than getting sucked into them as worlds.

When the Buddha talked about a practice that helps develop all four frames of reference, he pointed to breath meditation. With every framework, you're always conscious of the breath, regardless of whether you're dealing with body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities. You never lose your reference to the breath, even when you're trying to develop things like dispassion: You try to breathe in a way that develops dispassion or you notice how you're breathing when dispassion arises. You notice how you're breathing as you're contemplating inconstancy. You try to stay anchored here with the body.

This is why so much is focused here, because if you don't have this anchor, it's like being pulled into the clouds, carried off by the winds. You don't know where you'll eventually come down to earth. But when you have something to anchor yourself to the ground, you don't get pulled away. There may be some pull, but you can resist it. You don't lose your bearings and you know where you are.

So it's important to realize how much you need to have a really solid foundation here with the body, and

not be in too great a hurry to move on to some other frame of reference. Even when you're aware of feelings or mind states, you want to have your body here as a post. Remember the image the Buddha gave of the six different types of animals tied together by a leash. If they're not tied to a post, then whichever animal happens to be strongest is going to drag all the rest off in the direction it wants to go. But if they're tied to a post, they can only go so far, and it doesn't matter which one is stronger than the others. They're all right here.

Then as you're right here, you can notice what else is going on inside the mind. It's not that when you're aware of the breath you're aware only of the breath and not of the mind. In fact, what usually happens is, as the breath gets more and more calm, more and more subtle, to the point that it stops, you see the activity of the mind more and more clearly. When the breath stops, it's not because you're holding the breath but simply because the activity of the mind is so calm that you're not in need of a lot of oxygen, you're not using up a lot of oxygen, you're not creating a lot of carbon dioxide in the bloodstream. So there's not that much need for your in and out breathing. Simply maintaining a perception of the breath channels in the body all being open and all connected with one another is enough to keep you going. When the breath is that still, then the events of the mind become more and more prominent, and you can watch them from that stillness. The stillness can be your foundation.

At that point you can work with the other elements. Ajaan Fuang used to tell his students—once they reached the stage in the meditation where the breath got really calm and still—to focus first on the warmth in the body. What's the warmest spot in the body right now? Focus there, and think of the warmth spreading out from that spot. Then you can do the same thing with the water property, which he identified as the feelings of coolness. Where do you feel coolest right now? Can you balance the two? It's like playing with the dials on a new stereo. You turn up the volume, turn it down, play with the balance, until you get something that feels just right. Then you do the same, balancing the breath energy with the sense of earth. Sometimes if you get really into the earth element, everything gets really heavy, and it can get really unpleasant, so you want to balance it out a bit.

What you're learning about here is the power of perception, the labels you place on things, and how perception can have a huge impact on your feeling tone. So right there you're playing with feelings and mind states. At the same time, you're gaining a sense of what's skillful and not, which equates with analysis of qualities, one of the factors for awakening. So you've got dhammas, or mental qualities, there too. It's hard to meditate without getting everything engaged like this. But when the breath is really still—this is one of the reasons we work with it so assiduously—when the breath is very still, then we can see things very clearly, what exactly is going on in the mind, and we can sort out all of the different ways that we glom things together and turn them into huge big sticky forms of suffering.

This is why, when one of Ajaan Fuang's students complained that her practice wasn't making all the fast progress that she wanted, he said, "Look, work on your foundation. Make it good and strong. Don't worry about the insights, don't worry about all the other things that you think lie down the path, because when the foundation is good, that's when the other things are possible." If the foundation isn't good, then everything else is unstable, shaky. You can think about these things, you can play with them a bit, but then they all start to fall apart.

But if your foundation is good, as you stay here with your breath, then you have a foundation for understanding: When the Buddha talks about form, feeling, perception, fabrications, or consciousness, what is he talking about? You can see these things in action. Or feelings, mind states, and mental qualities: You can see them in action because you've worked through all the interference that the breath was creating. By staying here with the breath and making it really still, you've learned how to pare things down. You have hands-on experience with these different frames of reference, or the different aggregates.

This means that concentration is not something just to step on and then immediately jump off and go someplace else in search of insight. You want to stay here. This is your foundation. Everything else will have to stand on this foundation. So don't let yourself do a slipshod job here. Be careful, be meticulous, because it's

not just a step on which you place your foot for a bit and then jump off. This is where you're going to stay. This is your home, your *vihara-dhamma*. Make sure to build it so that it'll last.