

Wake Up from Addiction

January 12, 2016

As you're settling down with the breath, you don't want to think too much about it, just enough to make it comfortable. You don't want to analyze things to the point where you start losing the breath and getting caught up in the analysis.

So you ask yourself just a few simple questions:

Where do you feel the breath right now?

Does it feel comfortable?

What would make it feel more comfortable?

What would make it feel more like something you really do want to settle down with and spend some time?

That's pretty much it.

As I've said before, when you're getting the mind into concentration and to develop jhana, the object isn't jhana. The object is the breath. It's only when you've settled down with the breath for quite a while that you begin to be in a position where you can step back a little bit to really question and understand what you're doing, so that it does become more of a skill.

You begin to see patterns. And one of the patterns you begin to notice is that you really are developing what the Buddha called the seven factors for awakening.

Sometimes the list is mistaken to be a description of what awakening is like, but it's not. It's a description how you get there. Awakening is so much more than these things. And of course, the description of how you get there is much more useful than the description of what it's going to be like when you get there.

So what have you got in the list? You've got mindfulness: in this case, remembering to keep your focus on the breath, which is body in and of itself. You're trying to be ardent to stay here. Alert to what's going on. Mindfulness means remembering not only to stay here, but also what works in order to keep you here. Then you're ardent to do whatever needs to be done. And finally, as they say in the texts, you're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words you're with the body in and of itself, and not the body in the context of world or thinking about issues of the world. You're right here with this sensation of the presence of the body. That's your frame of reference.

Then there's analysis of qualities, as you analyze what kind of breathing is good, what kind of breathing is not good, and also look into the qualities in the mind. Is the pressure of the mind's focus too strong or too weak? Are you feeling lax and lazy or are you feeling overly stimulated? And what can you do to bring things back into balance?

Once you've analyzed things, then you put in the effort to bring them into balance. That effort is the third factor for awakening.

When you do it right, there's going to be a sense of fullness, refreshment, or rapture. That's the fourth. This rapture or refreshment can come in a weak form or in a strong form. But the refreshment is what allows you to stay here and say, "Oh yes, this really is good."

Then, after a while, the rapture or refreshment has done its work and begins to fade a little bit, and there's more of a sense of ease, calm and when there's a calm then the mind can get concentrated. Those are the fifth and sixth factors.

And as the mind goes through the stages of concentration, you finally get to a point where the mind feels very equanimous. It's not excited about anything but it feels okay right here—and okay not in a small way. Okay in a big way. Everything feels very stable, you feel really at home, settled down here. That equanimity is the seventh and final factor.

Now, analysing things in terms of these seven factors is useful for reminding you how to get into concentration when things are difficult. And it's important to notice that this is one of the lists of qualities in which your discernment does some work before you settle in. In other words, you're not just using brute force to get the mind to settle down, and it's not the case that it naturally settles down on its own. You find that you've got to do a little work to analyze things a bit to see what's good and what's not good, what needs encouraging, what needs cutting away. And only then will the mind settle down.

But understanding your practice in terms of these factors is good not only for reminding yourself of how to get into concentration, but for other purposes as well.

One way in which they're really useful is if you find yourself engaged in some addictive behavior or addictive thinking, you can think of that addiction as like being caught in a bad dream, trapped in the sense that it keeps looping around.

The mind goes through lots of different feedback loops. If you were to trace the mind as it wanders through the day ordinarily, it tends to switch from one loop to another loop to another one to another one. But certain patterns of behavior are more like getting stuck in a loop and not being able to get out.

You do something to feel better, but then you feel bad about it and then because you feel bad about it you want to do something to make you feel good and so you go back and you do the first thing again, because you think that's the only way you're going to get a little hit of pleasure. The mind just goes around and around and around in this loop and doesn't come out.

What you've got to learn how to do is get out of that loop. And as I said, if you can regard it as a bad dream, ask yourself: What do you do to get out of the dream?

Well, you wake up. That's what these factors are for.

So let's say you've got a desire to give in to some lustful thinking. Part of the mind says there's going to be some pleasure there, but you have to recognize that that's not part of the mind you want to hang out with or to believe. Even though there might be some pleasure in the short term, the long-term results are not all that positive, not at all in your best interests.

So the first thing you do is establish your awareness with the body or with any of the frames of reference for mindfulness. But say you're with the body: Okay, work with the breath. Try to reclaim the breath, because oftentimes these patterns of thinking tend to lay hold of your breath. They come in and seize it and make it theirs. They appropriate the breath for their purposes. They make you feel uncomfortable here, uncomfortable there; this part of the body feels tense, that part of the body feels blocked. And part of the committee will say, "Okay, if you give in to our desire, then we'll unblock things."

It's as if they've kidnapped the breath and are holding it hostage.

So you've got to reclaim the breath.

Breathe deeply. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing, that airs things out inside and that allows you to establish yourself with a frame of reference, so that you're not swimming around with these thoughts. You've at least got the breath in the body here. When you hold to that, you're putting yourself in a position where you can watch things in the mind from a little bit of distance. You don't have to get involved.

Remember: *The* main prerequisite for understanding things going on in the mind is your ability to step back from them and see them as something separate.

That's what the image of the committee of the mind is useful for. As is Ajaan Lee's image of all those germs going through your blood, some of them going through the blood vessels around your brain and dropping off a few thoughts as they go past, or going around other parts of the body and making you feel feelings here and feelings there, sensations here and there that would get you provoked into doing something unskillful.

The purpose of these perceptions is to help you see your thoughts as alien. You don't have to side with them, you don't have to take them on. And as for the committee, just remember that some of the members of the committee are bad. They've been pretty powerful in the past, but they don't have to maintain that power. You can learn how to change the balance of power in the mind. So see them as alien, too. That deprives them of a lot of their strength right there.

Once you've got this beachhead with the breath and this position where you can stand, at the body in and of itself, that's when you can analyze things. In other words, this urge you have to think these thoughts: What does it feel like in the body? What are the sensations that accompany it in the different parts of the body? What are the feelings, what are the thought states that go through the mind? Instead of just running with them, tell yourself that you're going to watch them for a bit to see what they're like, where they're heading, and then take them apart.

The Buddha gives lots of different ways of analyzing these things. You could look at them as aggregates: the sensations in the body, the feelings of pleasure pain, the perceptions the images you hold in mind.

Take perceptions, for example: What are the images you hold in mind, not so much about the object you're lusting for, but what images do you have about lust?

Why does it seem attractive, what's the glamor, what's the appeal?

Can you switch those images?

Or the way you talk to yourself about it: Can you change the story line so that the narrative ends up pretty disastrous? They call this poisoning the fantasy. Analyze things like this so that you can step back from them and see them as separate, and see exactly what it is that exerts the pull that keeps you going back again and again and again.

So you take the terms of analysis and you keep applying them.

This is what the factor of persistence is: If you see something that's unskillful, take it apart. Don't simply fall in with it. Step back from it. And the more you can analyze it into discrete sensations, or discrete feelings, or discrete thoughts, the less power it has. It's because these things connect up that they create a strong impression, an overwhelming urge to think thoughts that you know are not going to be helpful, or to do things you know are going to be unskillful, that are going to lead to trouble down the line.

Try to open things up. Because all too often when you get focused on something like this—be it anger, lust or whatever—your awareness narrows down and seems to be surrounded on all sides. But if you can open up your awareness, give it a foundation here in the body, and then take all these different things apart, then you see that as they are taken on one by one by one, they don't have that power. It's when they meld together that they seem strong and overwhelming. So take them apart, chop them into pieces.

As you keep at this in the beginning, it's going to be a strain because you've got to work against some very strong tendencies. But there will come a point where you break through and there's a sense of refreshment. You've made it to the other side. That's what allows the mind to finally get a sense of ease and to get concentrated and be equanimous toward the original urge: in other words, not be interested in it any more.

This is how you wake up from the addiction. When you've done it once, then you want to remember that it felt really good when you finally got past the lust. That's a good thing to keep in mind, as more food for mindfulness the next time around. As we're practicing, we're trying to gather up enough experience so that our mindfulness isn't informed just by what we've heard or read. It's also informed by what we've done that's gotten results.

And you want to remind yourself of how good the results are, because that's going to change the tenor of the perceptions in your mind—especially the ones that tell you that once this urge comes, you've got to give into it inevitably, and there's no other way out once you've already gotten this far down the line with this particular fantasy so let's just run with it—Well, you've got to learn how to say, “No. Maybe I've been with it for a certain amount of time but I don't have to follow it all the way through. I don't have to finish the story line. I'm not committed. I've cut things off in the past, so why can't I do it now?”

It's interesting that all too often we find it hard to be committed to meditation, but once something unskillful comes into the mind there's this idea that, “Well I've already done this much, I've gotten this far. I'm committed to I might as well go all the way.”

We can cut that story line, or cut that threat.

Then there's the other voice, the one that says, “You've given in in the past, you're sure to give in again in a five minutes, so make it easy on both of us. Give in quickly this time. Don't struggle.”

Well, remind yourself that the struggle itself is something skillful.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this a lot. He says, “When you give in totally without a struggle, how can you say that you lost? You didn't even put up a fight. If there was a fight then you could say one side won and the other side lost, but here's there's no fight at all.” There's more honor in struggling and losing than in not struggling at all.

So put up some struggle. And when the voice says that you're going to give in, you can reply, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do in five minutes time, but right now I'm not going to give in." And of course, in five minutes time you tell yourself again, "Right now I'm not going to give in, either." Then you can make your determination outlast the urge to give into your addiction. And you can strengthen that determination by being with the breath, by having these tools for analyzing things so that what seems like an overwhelming urge is just broken down into aggregates, little bits and pieces of feeling, physical sensations, perceptions, thoughts, consciousness of these things.

That's how you get past. That's how you wake up out of these bad dreams.

So try to appreciate the fact that, as you're working on getting the mind settled down with the breath, you're getting to know your mind a lot better. You're developing some skills that you can use in a lot of different situations that you might not expect, but the skill are there, ready to be put into use.

The Buddha taught things that are useful. Sometimes these lists seem kind of dry and foreign, but as you get more and more acquainted with your breath, acquainted with the mind as it settles in circles around the breath, and finally settles in, you see that the Buddha's descriptions are really accurate, very precise, very helpful. He worked many eons to be in the position where he could give that kind of advice, and it's meant to be used. So think of all the trouble he went to to learn these things and to pass them on. Make it your sign of gratitude for the Buddha that you're going to use his teachings and come out with results.