

Balanced Breathing

July 29, 2005

One of the constant messages we get from the world is that what you're doing right now is not all that important. The important things are being done by other people, some other place, some other time. They want you to help them keep their economy going, watch their shows, as if what you had to do with your time were not that important.

This is where the message of the world and the message of the Dhamma part ways. The message of the Dhamma is that what you're doing right now is very important. It's the most important thing you can pay attention to right now. It's what you're responsible for. It's what's going to have an effect on your life and the lives of the people around you. What you did yesterday is done, so there's nothing much you can do about it—although you can learn from it. In fact, that's one of the most important lessons about the past is that it teaches you: When you do this, these are the results; when you do that, those are the results.

So it's not as if the Buddha is asking you to forget about the past. He's just asking you to look at the past in the right light: how you can get the most out of it. If you sit around nostalgic for things in the past, that's not relating to past in the right way. As for the future, if the future is going to be good, it has to come from the present's being good. So focus your attention right here. Try to be very careful about how you focus your attention. Focus on the breath coming in and going out. And don't let the breath get mechanical. Try to be sensitive to the way you breathe. There's a lot of information about your subconscious mind in the way you breathe.

We were talking this afternoon about clamping down. Some people have the idea that when you focus on breathing in and breathing out, you've got to make it really obvious: "This is the in breath. That's the out breath." As a result, you tend to breathe a little bit too long to establish that "Okay, this is the in-breath." And you breathe out a little bit too long, to establish "That's the out-breath." There's a slight strain or pinch in the breath energy at the end of the breath to mark the boundary very clearly.

That's a cartoon idea of breathing. What you want, as much of possible, is to maintain a seamless sense of energy. As the breath comes in and the breath goes out, it doesn't disturb a sense of comfortable energy in the body. You don't have to define very clearly where the one begins and the other ends. They're all part of the same element.

If you notice the mind slipping off, be meticulous about bringing it back. It's the little things that are important. The Buddha has a teaching on little things that you're not supposed to be careless about. You can't be careless about little snakes, like baby rattlers. They don't know how much poison to put into their bites, so they put all their poison into each bite, which is why a bite from a baby rattler can sometimes be worse than a bite from an adult rattler. The Buddha also says you can't be careless around little princes. Little princes grow up to be big princes who carry grudges from their childhood. You can't be careless around a little fire. Little sparks can grow into huge conflagrations. And he also said you can't be careless around young monks, because sometimes young monks have more power in their meditation than you might have expected.

Well, there are other things you can't be careless about, too, starting with the little defilements in the mind, because they can grow into big defilements. You can't be careless about little lapses of mindfulness, because they can grow into huge lapses. So try to be meticulous as you look after the breath. Take very seriously whatever sense of comfort you can maintain. Find a level of energy in the body and see how you can breathe in a way that doesn't destroy that comfortable level of energy. And notice even the slightest fluctuations, the slightest disturbances. This it may seem obsessive, but it's an important habit to have in your meditation.

Ajaan Fuang used to tell me about Ajaan Mun, how obsessively clean and neat he was. And it was for a purpose. Your outside habits have an effect on your insight habits. This is one of the reasons why the forest tradition takes the monks' rules so seriously, even the minor ones. Ajaan Mun's statement to Ajaan Fuang, one time was, "People rarely get whole logs in their eyes, but they can get sawdust in their eyes, and it can blind them." In other words, even the minor rules, *especially* the minor rules, are important to look after, because they force you to develop that habit of being meticulous. We have a tendency to say, "Well, let's get to the major principles, and not worry about the tiny details." But, of course, the devil is in the details.

When things come up in the mind, big problems start out as little tiny things. A little tiny bit of greed, a little tiny bit of irritation, if you're not careful, can take root and grow. A little bit of sloppiness in the way you're focusing, a little bit of sloppiness in the way keep with your object: That can take root and grow as well.

So find a way to be meticulous without being tense in being meticulous. You want to be meticulous and yet relaxed, with a sense of ease. The greater the sense of ease you can bring to this, the longer you'll be able to do it, the easier you'll find it to maintain a sense of balance, a sense of well-being. But you have to be very

observant. That's one of the important tricks of meditation. Often, when we think about concentration, we think about tensing up around the object. That kind of concentration can get the mind focused, but it's hard to keep it going. It doesn't last. When you can stay focused with a sense of ease, though, that can last for a long time. It can become your basic default mode.

So be careful. That's one of the ways you can translate the Buddha's last words. He said to become consummate through being heedful. "Consummate" here means consummate in your virtue, consummate in your views, bringing all the factors of the path to a state of consummation, completion. You do that by being careful, realizing that you can't be sloppy. You can't be careless. After all, some of the things you're bringing to consummation are tranquility, serenity, equanimity, contentment. Those are not tense qualities.

One of the basic skills you need to learn in the meditation is how to work persistently and just keep at it, keep at it, but not get tense about it. When you can find that proper balance, you can stay with the path. You don't keep straying off into the woods. You have a sense of feeling at home as you work on following the path.

So do your best to maintain this sense of being right here with the breath in the present moment, having a sense of its importance, having a sense of the importance of being more mindful and more alert, but also a sense of how important it is to feel at home here. That's the balance you want to strike.