

## *The Buddha's Secret Weapon*

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Try to be comfortable with the breath. Find the right amount of pressure for your focus—not so weak that you start drifting off, and not so heavy that it starts interfering with the breathing. Try to get a sense of what breathing feels best. This may involve playing with the length of the breath, the heaviness of the breath, or your sense of how the breath comes in and out of the body.

All this comes under evaluation, one of the factors of the first jhana. When you find something that feels really comfortable—a nice breathing sensation that feels good all the way in, all the way out, you're not squeezing anything in any part of the breathing process—then think of that sense of open relaxation spreading out to fill the whole body, so that the body seems to be one large, connected sensation. There may be little islands here and there that resist that sensation for a while, but don't pay them any mind. Focus on the parts that do feel connected, do feel comfortable.

This is singleness of preoccupation, another factor of jhana. When you're focused on the breath, that's directed thought. So you've got the three causal factors of the first jhana right there. Then the results will come: a sense of ease and well-being or pleasure; a sense of refreshment, sometimes to the point of rapture. It feels really, really gratifying breathing in, breathing out. It seems to satisfy the body's hunger for a comfortable sensation.

This ability to tap into a sense of ease and well-being, the food of rapture they call it, is the Buddha's secret weapon in the path to the end of suffering. As he points out, most people think there's only one alternative to physical and mental pain, and that's sensual pleasure. That's why people go running after sensual pleasure, trying to get pleasure from other people, pleasure from things, because otherwise they feel they'll just be stuck in pain. They go back and forth between the two extremes that the Buddha talked about in his very first sermon: sensual indulgence and self-torture. There comes a point when people indulging in sensuality an awful lot feel very guilty about the whole thing, and they go to the opposite extreme, which is to punish themselves. But as the Buddha pointed out, neither extreme is going to get you to the end of suffering.

What he does is to provide you with this other way of escaping pain and getting a sense of well-being: just having the mind still with a non-sensual comfortable sensation flooding the body, your awareness filling the body, so that the mind doesn't feel constricted. It feels wide open, at ease. That satisfies the

mind's desire for pleasure. In fact, that's a pleasure that's much more encompassing, much more immediate than even sensual pleasure. And it's much more lasting. This is the pleasure that enables you to stay on the path. Without it, the path is just a lot of shoulds: You should do this; you should abstain from that. If the mind doesn't have any sense of gratification, if it doesn't get to satisfy its desire for some immediate visceral pleasure, it's going to rebel against those shoulds.

An important principle in the path is learning how to get a deep and gratifying sense of well-being, pleasure, rapture, as you focus on the breath. So if the breath doesn't seem particularly rapturous or pleasurable, play with it for a while. If that doesn't help, just let it go and say, "If the body is going to breathe, it's going to breathe on its own. I'm not going to interfere." See what an uninterfered body is like, an uninterfered breath. There may come a sense of drowning, while you're trying to let the body do its own thing, but that's actually the other side of rapture. The uninterfered body is where the seeds of the potential for rapture lie.

So when you're adjusting the breath, you're learning to adjust away from unhealthy or uncomfortable patterns, but when you finally get to a sense of well-being in the breath, that's when you let it take over on its own, so that the shoulds of the path don't become onerous.

Once, when I was in Barre, they were giving a course on the Karaniya Metta Sutta, the one we chant often. I had taught my course the week before, and I was staying on to do a little study, a little meditation of my own, so they asked me to sit in on this other course. The teacher got to the very first line: "This is what should be done by someone who aims at the state of peace." Somebody raised his hand and said, "Wait a minute, I thought there were no shoulds in Buddhism." They spent the whole morning arguing about that.

What the Buddha was saying is, *if* you want the state of peace, this is what you should do. He's basically talking terms of cause and effect. Right view is the should of the path: You should look at things in this way, and then you see that there's a duty. Now, the "should" here doesn't come from some outside being, as a decree laid down by God. It's the Buddha's own observation in terms of cause and effect. If you want to use cause and effect to put an end to suffering, this is how you should look at things. Each of the factors of right view has a "should" tacked on. When there is suffering, you should comprehend it. When there's a cause of suffering, you should let it go. With elements of the path rising up, you should develop them. And when there's an end to suffering, you should try to realize it.

Those are the should—and they're very congenial shoulds. After all, who doesn't want an end to suffering? The difficult part lies in being consistent in

taking that as your goal, sticking with it and learning how to look at things in line with these four truths and their duties, because it a means going through all of your preconceived notions, all of your attitudes and sorting them out to keep or to throw away, in terms of this one overriding concern.

But notice that the shoulds are for someone who wants happiness. There are so many other shoulds in the world that have no relationship to whether you're going to happy following the shoulds or not.

This is one of the problems in Western civilization: all the conflicting shoulds coming at us. Very few of them are really concerned with whether we're going to be happy. This is why there's such a strong sense in our society that if you want happiness, it's going to be a battle: You help either other people's happiness or the your own, but never the twain shall meet, except in very rare circumstances. So people go back and forth between self-indulgence and then taking on bodhisattva vows where they want to save all the rest of the world without any thought for themselves. Those are two other extremes.

The Buddha's solution is that there is a way to find your own true happiness and not harm anybody else. It actually contributes to their happiness. The image he gives is of the two acrobats: Each acrobat looks after his or her own sense of balance, and that way, they help each other. So in this way the Buddha gives you some shoulds that are concerned with your happiness, and he also gives you this secret weapon, this alternative to sensual pleasure and pain: the pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind, the pleasure that comes from learning how to focus on comfortable sensations in the body and let them spread. This way, in the course of following the shoulds of right view, you also develop a sense of happiness and well-being in doing it.

This way, both sides of the mind—the side that looks at the larger issues of life and wants to deal with these larger problems of suffering, and the other side that wants happiness right now, wants pleasure right now—can be satisfied through this practice. This is why the Buddha said, “Don't be afraid of the pleasure that comes from concentration.” There's the story of how after all those years of self-torture, he realized he'd come to a dead end. He stopped to reflect and he remembered a time when he was a child: He had gained calm state of oneness and well-being—the first jhāna—just sitting under a tree. He asked himself: “Is this the path? Maybe this is the path to the end of suffering.” And something in his mind said, “This could be it.” Then the question was, “Why am I afraid of that sense of well-being, the pleasure and rapture that come from that? Is there any blame attached to it?” No, none. So he gave that path a try.

Notice that his first intimation of the noble eightfold path was right concentration. And then, to turn that right concentration into the path to the end of suffering, he gathered the other seven factors as well. In one of the suttas he calls them the requisites or the aids to right concentration. Concentration is the heart of the path. The other factors make sure the heart stays on track. But they all work together. The shoulds and the pleasure come together right here.

So adjust your views so that they're in harmony with this. And adjust your practice so that you really can tap into a sense of well-being that's immediate, visceral, on-call for whenever you need it. That's when the path can gain the strength and nourishment it needs to grow and come together.