

Cutting Through the Hype

April 10, 2007

Stay focused on the process of breathing. Whatever sensations in the body tell you that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, try to stay with those sensations. You don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk. Let that be in the background. It's like a wall. If you leave the breath, you'll run into the Dhamma wall. The purpose of the talk is to point you back to the breath. Otherwise, don't let it distract you.

After all, where are you going to see what's happening in the mind unless you look right here in the present moment? The words in the talk are simply pointers to try to keep you focused on the issue of what you're doing right now. This is the Buddha's whole approach. He points to the doing. He talks very little about what you are. In fact, he never answers that question: "Precisely what are you?" because that's not the problem. The problem is what you're doing, what you're doing that's creating suffering, and what you could possibly do that would put an end to suffering. It's the doing that makes all the difference. He never says that we're intrinsically good; he doesn't say we're intrinsically bad. When he was asked even if we have a self, he refused to answer the question. He didn't say no, didn't say yes. He tries to keep you balanced right here in the present moment, looking for actions and results, cause and effect.

The first place you want to encounter that balance is right here with the breath. Notice which thoughts keep you with the breath, which thoughts pull you away. For the time being, side with the thoughts that keep you with the breath. You want to make it more pleasant to be here. Try to keep the breath comfortable. Don't force it too much.

There's a tendency when we decide to concentrate on something that we clamp down, put a lot of pressure on it, for fear that if we don't put a lot of pressure on it, we're going to slip away. That makes it unpleasant, so that instead of keeping us here, the clamping down—as soon as we lose our focus or have a lapse of mindfulness—makes us bounce off even stronger.

So think of it more as simply keeping in touch with the breath. You're not trying to squeeze the breath or grab it. Just touch it. When I was first studying with Ajaan Fuang, he would often talk about "catching" the breath. The Thai word for "catching" can also mean to hold. So I was trying to hold the breath, in a way of trying to surround it and keep it clamped down. And of course that made it worse. Then one day I happened to be sitting meditating on a bus in Bangkok

and found that if I didn't clamp down, if I just allowed it to come in and go out on its own, it was a lot more pleasant.

So, being a typical Westerner, I went to complain to him. I said, "Why do you teach us to catch the breath? The more we catch it, the worse it gets." He laughed and said that that's not what he meant. He meant just to keep in touch with it, and the touch doesn't have to be very heavy at all, just heavy enough so that you can stay with the breath and keep track of it as continuously as possible. It's the continuity that makes all the difference. We're trying to see cause and effect, and if you're not looking continuously from the cause to the effect, you'll see just causes in isolation or the effects in isolation, and you won't see how they're connected. You won't even know they're connected.

So stay as continuously with the breath as you can. You can experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best. This is where you first begin to see the relationship between cause and effect. You breathe in a certain way: What influence does it have on how you experience the body? What influence does it have on the mind? Try long breathing for a while and see what that does. If you like the results, stick with it. If you don't, you can change: shorter in-breath, shorter out-breath, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. You can focus in different parts of the body. As long as you're conscious about what you're doing, or what changes are happening in the breath, then you can start seeing how the breath affects the mind, how the breath affects the other sensations in the body.

This sensitivity to cause and effect is going to go deeper and deeper in the practice as you get more sensitive even to vagrant thoughts coming through the mind. When your sensitivity gets really focused, really subtle, you can see a little bit of craving coming and then going away. Or you can see a particular perception coming into the mind and going away. You can start seeing the impact it has on other parts of the body and the mind. That's when you begin to get a really good sense of what's skillful and what's not.

This issue of skillfulness is very basic to all the Buddha's teachings.

There was once a layperson who was approached by someone from another religion and asked: "What does your teacher teach?" He went down through all the hot issues among the philosophers in those days, wanting to know if the Buddha took sides in any of them, and the layperson said that the Buddha didn't take sides with any of them at all. So the person from the other religion accused the layperson, saying, "Your teacher is a nihilist, he doesn't teach anything." And the layperson said, "No, that's not true. My teacher teaches one thing that's really important: what's skillful and what's not skillful." *Skillful* meaning acts that don't create harm, don't create suffering, whereas unskillful acts do create harm and

suffering. That's essential. That's what you're looking for here. This is probably one of the most interesting applications of cause and effect. It's not so much physical causes and effects. It's more exploring the process of mental cause and effect to see if you can use it to put an end to suffering.

So the focus here is based on goodwill, the desire for happiness, and happiness has to be attained through understanding. You can't just blunder your way into it. We experiment. We test to see what works and what doesn't work. Most of us don't like doing that, because most of us have a built-in advertising agency in the mind. We come up with an idea: "I'd like to do this," and then the mind can elaborate on it and create all the hype you need in order to get going, to search for that form of happiness. When it comes, it's usually not much, but again you can embroider it more. The hype while you are doing it, the hype after you've done it can get pretty intense, so the next time you think of it doing it again, you say, "Well, yeah, that was great," even though it was all hype, it was all camera angles, special effects.

So one of the things you want to look for is to see things in and of themselves. The actual feeling of pleasure, the actual feeling of pain: How long does it last? What is like when you don't embroider these things? What can stand up to the test that's good even it's not embroidered?

This required patience. It requires mindfulness, concentration, and the ability to stay focused on just this: "What am I doing? What's effect? How am I elaborating the effect to make the pleasure better? Or to make the pain worse than it has to be?" The mind does a lot of that as well. If you catch yourself in the act, then you can stop the elaborating and get a much better sense of actual cause and effect, what's really leading to happiness and what's not.

This can be revolutionary. Often we find ourselves entangled in all kinds of arrangements and responsibilities that are not helpful for anyone at all. But someplace in the mind, there's the hype that says, "This is going to be good; this is going to be important." What's liberating about this practice is that you begin to see those arrangements for what they are. If they really are harmful, you drop them. You don't need them. Life gets a lot simpler that way.

Keep maintaining this focus at all times: What are you doing? What are the results? Some of the results come immediately; some will come only over time. But if you learn how to watch carefully and consistently, you'll see the connection. That insight cuts through all the hype.

The reward of all this is that ultimately you'll find a form of happiness that stands the test. It doesn't need any hype, doesn't need any philosophical embroidery to make it sound impressive, because it's there. And it's true

happiness. You realize that nothing can change it, because no condition can touch it. And the questions of what it is, or who's behind it: You realize that those questions actually get in the way. As Ajaan Suwat once said, once you've attained the ultimate happiness, you're not going to ask who's experiencing it, because the fact that it's the ultimate happiness is plenty enough right there.

So just this simple process of noticing what you're doing and noticing the results can cut through a lot of unnecessary issues and take you straight to those that really matter.