

## *A Centered but Broad Awareness*

*October 1, 2010*

Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths, and then try to breathe in a way that feels good and refreshing for the body. If long breathing doesn't feel good, you could change the rhythm. Try to find a rhythm and texture that feels right for you. Or ask yourself, "What parts of the body need energizing? What parts of the body could use some good, nourishing breath?" And allow them to be nourished. Keep tabs on how the breath is going; how the body is going, because sometimes after a while of long breathing, the body's had enough long breathing. It'll want something else. So try to keep on top of it.

And as for any comfortable or refreshing or satisfying sensations that go with the breath, think of them spreading throughout the body so that it's not comfortable in just one spot. Allow other parts of the body to share in the comfort as well. Sometimes this may feel like water seeping through gravel, in the sense that the comfortable sensations can flow through some areas more easily than others. But that's okay. The body is not made out of gravel, but focus first on the areas where the sense of comfort flows.

Then, as you allow the comfortable sensations to seep through the places that at first resist it, they'll begin to dissolve away, dissolve away. But whether they'll do that quickly or slowly, that's their business. Your business is simply to keep tabs on the breath and try to develop a centered but broad awareness. The center is important so you don't go drifting off. And the breadth is important as well.

When the Buddha talks about meditation, he talks about allowing the sense of ease and rapture, or pleasure and rapture, to fill the whole body; to saturate the body. He gives different images for it. One is mixing water in with bath powder. In those days, they didn't use soap. They made a kind of a soap-dough to rub over their bodies, in the same way that we would make bread dough nowadays. You mix the water with the flour so the water and the flour are thoroughly mixed. There are no dry spots in the dough ball and the water doesn't drip out. Everything is nice and evenly spread throughout the dough.

In the beginning of the meditation, you have to work the sense of comfort through, and you have to think about what you're doing.

An image for the next stage is of a spring fed lake, where the water of the spring spreads throughout the lake, cools the lake. That doesn't require any working through, any thinking. The flow of the water just keeps coming and coming and coming and filling the lake. A third image is of a group of lotuses

growing in the water. They haven't come up over the surface of the water, so they're saturated with cool, still water from their roots to their tips. A fourth image is of a person covered with white cloth from head to toe so that his whole body is covered with white cloth. These are the images the Buddha gives of a sense of ease and rapture, a stillness that spreads throughout the body, and awareness that fills the body and goes along with the breath.

One of his terms for a mind in concentration is the mind that's enlarged or expanded. The Pali word is *mahaggata citta*, the enlarged mind; the expanded mind. Having the mind expanded like this is important in several ways. One, it helps keep you from falling asleep. Sometimes it's all too easy when the breath feels comfortable and you're focused on one little spot, the breath gets more and more refined, you lose track of the breath, and you fall into an air pocket or just drift away.

So you want to expand your awareness, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, all the way around the body. If you can't do the whole body all at once, try to go through it section by section, noticing how the breathing process feels in each part of the body. If you feel any tension or tightness where you're focused, allow it to relax and move on to the next section. You might start at the navel, work up the front of the body. Go up through the head, then down the back, out the legs; starting again at the back of the neck and going down the shoulders and out the arms. Keep this up until you're ready to try the whole body all at once, and try to think of all the breath processes as working together. This helps give you some work to do with the pleasure of the breath, the pleasure of the concentration.

As for any pains in the body, just think of the breath flowing right through them. Don't allow any tension to build up around them. Think of them as being permeable. Breath energy goes right through. It actually does, but you've got to hold that perception in mind to help encourage it.

This way, you create a good comfortable place for the mind to stay. And you're working with the pleasure. This is important. We don't just sit with the pleasure and wallow in it. We realize that pleasure can be used.

That's what's radical about the Buddha's teachings on pain and pleasure. Both of them have their uses. Pain, he said, is something you want to comprehend. So you don't want to run away from it all the time. You have to be able to look at it to understand it, particularly mental pain.

It's good to work with physical pain as well. But in order to sit with it and comprehend it, you need a good comfortable place to go to—your safe retreat—so that the mind can develop a sense of confidence in the face of the pain, knowing

that no matter how bad it gets, there's always a place you can go where you can get a sense of comfort, a sense of nourishment. That's what the breath is for. And through comprehending pain, you learn an awful lot of things about the mind.

Pain is like a watering hole out in the middle of a savannah. All the animals in the savannah have to come there to the hole sometime during the day. So if you want to know what the animals are like, if you want to take pictures of them or make a movie of them, you don't go wandering around the savannah. You just stay at the watering hole, and the animals will come. The same way, if you want to understand your mind, you'll find that just about everything the mind is going to do to itself, it's going to do around pain: the ways it complains to itself, the ways it like to make itself feel like a victim, or simply its sense that it's in the line of fire of the pain. You can watch these things happening. And you can call them into question.

Especially your perceptions around the pain: You might try other alternative, more skillful perceptions. One is that the pain is just there. It's not doing anything to you. It has no intention to hurt you. And two, the pain is extremely variable. Even though we may have a sense that it's a solid block of discomfort, if you look at it, you notice that pain sensations arise and pass away, arise and pass away very quickly. So think of them passing away, passing away as soon as you see them. Focus on that aspect. The same way as when you sit in a train with your back to the engine. As you watch the countryside, it's going away from you, away from you. That way you don't feel so victimized by the pain. But this requires, as I said, a good place to stay.

As for pleasure, you want to work with the pleasure in the concentration so that you can have a sense that it can be made to seep through the body, permeate the body, saturate the body. Even though there may be bits of gravel here, at least you can get to the water to go through and around the gravel, to cool things down. This alerts you to the fact that your awareness really is large. When you make it narrow and small, of course it's going to be victimized. Of course it's going to feel overwhelmed. But if you can hold the perception that your awareness is much larger, you realize that it's actually larger than anything else you hear or see or sense.

Think of everything you experience as appearing on a large screen, and the screen is larger than whatever appears. That gives you room to experience things in a way that doesn't feel oppressive. Things come through and go out; come through and go out. They don't need to have an effect on that sense of awareness that's large and expanded.

An image the Buddha uses is of a lump of salt. If it's placed in a cup of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. But if you throw it into a clean, clear river, you can still drink the water of the river because the water is so much more in comparison with the salt.

You can carry this sense of an enlarged awareness around with you. It's bigger than the people you meet; bigger than the issues that come up in terms of day-to-day life. It's bigger than the survival of the body, even. The more you learn how to hold that sense of awareness, the less things will impinge on you.

All this is the power of concentration.

This isn't even in the end of the path. It's not even the goal, but it can deal with a lot of the sufferings that we create for ourselves when we make the mind really small and easily overwhelmed. As we practice, we can get a sense of the mind's being larger than pleasure, larger than pain, larger than your body, larger than the world of your visual field or the things you hear. It puts your awareness on a much more solid basis. You feel less threatened. It's easier to deal with whatever comes up.

So try to work on developing this larger sense of awareness: centered but broad. The center is what keeps it anchored in the present moment. The breadth is what allows you to gain a sense of spaciousness and ease so that you can do the work of insight: seeing exactly where it is that the mind creates suffering for itself unnecessarily.

You see this by comprehending any kind of pain or stress that comes up—because those are our duties, to comprehend the pain so that you can see the cause of the stress: to it clearly that as soon as this particular mind formation comes up, stress comes along with it, and when that mind formation dissolves, that particular level of stress goes away. It can be the way you think about things, the way you perceive things, the way you feel about things. But again, you learn how to get the “you” out of there. See that there's just an event coming up in the mind and it's accompanied by stress. When you see that, you let it go. You let go of the thought and the stress disappears as well.

It's like going into a room and seeing that it's full of smoke. You can't put out the smoke. You go and try to find the fire. You put out the fire and that takes care of the smoke. Most of us, however, try to put out the smoke, in other words, we try to let go of the suffering. And no wonder the pain keeps coming. Suffering is something you can't let go. You have to comprehend it. The you let go of the cause. Once you can make that distinction, things get cleared up.

But you have to put the mind in a position where it's able to watch the pain without having the agenda of making the pain go away, trying to put out the

smoke. That's why we develop this state of concentration: centered but broad. That gives you the foundation from which you can perform the other duties of the path: developing the path, comprehending the stress to abandon the cause, so that you can realize a sense of dispassion for the cause.

And it's through the dispassion that we develop release. We obtain release. But this centered and broad awareness is the part you develop. This is what you work on, giving yourself a vantage point and a range of awareness that allows you to have the strength and the patience and the solidity for really looking into why the mind causes itself suffering and stress.