

Anupassana

April 18, 2018

Tell yourself that the breath is your friend, and you're going to stay with your friend. You're going to be loyal. You're going to be consistent. In other words, you're going to be a true friend to the breath, and that way the breath gets friendlier. But the important thing is that you stay together.

There's a Pali term *anupassana*, which literally means to follow and to watch. You can translate it as "keeping track." It's how you stay together. It's a term used both for concentration and for insight practice.

When you're doing mindfulness practice—trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath and stay with the breath so as to get into concentration—that's called *anupassana*. You're keeping track of the breath. It's like keeping track of a thread going through a carpet. There are lots of other threads in the carpet, but you're not going to get interested in them, or if you're going to be interested in them, it's simply in terms of how they relate to the thread you're following.

So think of the breath as a thread that you follow through time. And to be on good terms with it, Ajaan Lee talks about how you work with the breath energy in the body. The Buddha simply says to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and to calm bodily fabrication. He also talks about developing a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture even, as the mind settles down, and then letting that pleasure and rapture spread to fill the whole body. He doesn't say how, but working with the breath is a good way of, one, being aware of the whole body, and two, calming the breath, and then three, letting that sense of ease spread throughout the whole body, all at the same time. You're trying to get to a state where the breath fills the body, your awareness fills the body, a sense of ease fills the body. All these things come together.

The "breath" here, of course, means breath energy. It's one of the four elements: earth, water, wind, fire. It takes a while sometimes to get on good terms with it, because we can easily mistake it for the water element. The breath flows through the body, but so does the blood. We can confuse the two. You can push the blood around. In fact, we do that an awful lot as we go through our lives. If you've had a lot of repressed emotions, you've been pushing the blood around quite a bit. Or if the body's not well, sometimes the blood is flowing in the wrong spots and stagnating in other spots, so when you feel that something's not quite right, you try to push it around. Well, breath is something you can't push. Its nature is already to flow, to flow through everything, no matter how solid, but if

you push it, you're pushing the blood, which can't flow through solids, and sometimes that can give you headaches. It can get you all discombobulated.

So it's important that you understand what it is you're following. You're following the sense of energy. And to let it flow, the word "let" is important. It's like opening valves on water pipes. When you open the valve, you don't have to push the water through. Just open the valve, and the water will do the flowing on its own. In the same way, wherever there's a sense of tension anywhere in the body, you want to relax that tension. It's like opening a valve to allow the breath to flow through. So just think of releasing, and that's pretty much all you have to do.

In fact, as the mind begins to settle down, you'll begin to realize that the perception you hold in mind is what's going to make all the difference, what's going to allow you to relax to begin with, to keep you relaxed, and to allow the breath to flow smoothly throughout the body. If the flow seems to be working at cross purposes—in other words, it's flowing in one direction in one part and an opposite direction in another part, and they're clashing—just hold in mind the question: How could they work together? And sometimes the breath will just sort itself out. All you have to do is allow. Then as the sense of well-being spreads, you can let your awareness spread into the body, too.

For concentration to work, for mindfulness to work, this process of anupassana—keeping track—works best if everything is on good terms. You're trying to get the mind anchored in the body with the breath, and you follow this regardless of whatever else comes up. Sometimes visions come. Sometimes sounds come. And all too often we think, "Ah, here's a sign that something important is happening." Well, you try to stay with the breath because the breath is meaningless, and don't go jumping for meanings.

We had a visitor here recently who was trying to gauge what level of concentration he was on and where he had advanced in terms of his insight, but these things don't come with signs. Whatever signs there are could easily be coming from ignorance. Your main task is to anupassana, to follow and watch this one thing and be on good terms with it. You're doing this with something meaningless because it then allows you to question the meanings you give to things. When a sign comes up or a vision comes up and the mind says, "This must mean this," or "this must mean that," well, put a question mark next to that comment, because one of the easiest ways that meditation can pull you astray is if you start giving meanings to things and believing the meanings. Either when a vision comes or when an insight comes, you say "Oh, this must be a sign of x or I've reached this level or that level." That's how people go astray.

Upasika Kee has a good piece of advice. She says that whenever an insight comes, look at what immediately follows the insight in the mind. Sometimes you see a little bit of greed, a little bit of aversion, and you realize, okay, the insight has been tainted. You've latched onto it. Ajaan Lee's method for dealing with insights as they come like this is to ask yourself: To what extent is it true and to what extent is it false? To what extent is the opposite true?

So you can put a question mark next to these things. But the important thing is that you begin to see these processes of the mind as you give meanings to things and then ride with them, and you can see that you can cause yourself an awful lot of trouble that way.

This is where the anupassana turns from concentration into insight. The difference between concentration and insight is basically the questions you're asking. With concentration, the right question is: "How do I get the mind to settle down? How do I get to enjoy the object? How do I get to be continually with the object, become one with the object?" And then you follow it. With insight, the questions are: "How is this a fabrication, and what's the best way to deal with these fabrications?"

The Buddha's instructions on breath are divided into four tetrads, four sets of four steps. In each tetrad, the processes are the same. One tetrad deals with the breath, one tetrad with feelings, another with mind, another with dhammas—in other words, the four frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness. In each case, you get sensitive to the fact that that particular thing is being fabricated, and then you play with it to heighten that sense, "Oh yes, this really is something that I'm putting together right now."

You want to see this because your experiences are composed of two things: One is the results of karma coming in from the past, and the other is both what you're doing right now and the results of what you're doing right now. In fact, what you're doing right now is what enables you to experience the raw material coming in from the past. When the Buddha explains dependent co-arising, this fabrication in the present moment actually comes prior to your awareness of the results of past actions, and the Buddha wants you to see that. You don't have much control over the results of past actions, but you do have control over what you're doing right now, and you want to see, "What am I doing right now that's causing suffering? Can I fabricate things in a way that cause less suffering?"

So with the breath, you see that it is a kind of fabrication. The way you breathe sometimes goes totally on automatic pilot, but there is an intentional element, and all too often that automatic pilot disguises some underlying intentions that you don't notice. So you try to bring them up into consciousness. Ask yourself:

“I’m deciding when to breathe in, when to breathe out, so how can I do that well? How can I find a sense of ease and well-being? And then how can I calm the effect of the breath on the mind?”

The same pattern applies to feelings. Feelings are a part of what they call mental fabrication. They go together with perceptions. Perceptions are the images you hold in mind, and here we’re interested in the perceptions you use to keep the mind with the breath, but also the perceptions that you use to deal with any obstructions that come up, any hindrances that come up. The number one thing is to perceive, say, sensual desire or ill will as hindrances. Perceive anything that pulls you away from the breath right now as a hindrance, and then learn to perceive it as something that you really want to get past.

Those are two different perceptions. Sometimes you can perceive something as a hindrance, but another part of the mind says, “I don’t care. I like it.” So you have to have other perceptions to help you see that this really is not anywhere you really want to go. You can think about the drawbacks of that hindrance. If you thought about it for twenty-four hours, where would it take you? Well, not anywhere good. So why give it any time at all?

But more important are the perceptions that allow you to stay with the breath, and you’ll find that different perceptions will have a different effect on the breath and a different effect on the mind, so use the perceptions first that give rise to a sense of well-being, pleasure, rapture. Then use the perceptions that calm it down, that give rise more to a state of equanimity, so you can see to what extent you really are fabricating things right now. Those are the fabrications you want to get insight into. Which are the ones you want to hold onto? Which ones are the ones you don’t want to hold onto? I.e., which are the ones you want to keep doing? And which ones are habits that you want to stop?

This is where we bring in some more perceptions—the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self—and that, too, is a kind of anupassana, insight anupassana. As you apply a perception, say, to the breath or to the mind as being something inconstant, being something fabricated, again you’re keeping track of something. You’re keeping track of its inconstancy or its stress or the fact that you have no control over it. You may have some control over it. If you didn’t have any control over these things, you wouldn’t be able to meditate. You wouldn’t be able to practice. But there’s an extent to which when you try to control things you run up against a wall. You want to see that and ask yourself, “To what extent can I find true happiness with this? To what extent can I hold onto this and depend on it?” When you see that it’s not dependable or worth holding onto, that’s when you let it go. As long as it is worth holding onto as you’re working on your path,

you don't let it go quite yet. But when the path is fully developed, that's when you let go of everything. You see that everything is not worth holding onto.

It's a value judgment, and there's no technique that can convince you of the value of letting go until you see for yourself that you go for a particular way of fabricating things in your mind, fabricating your experience, because there's an allure. And you have to ask yourself, "What is it that I'm trying to get out of this?" Especially when it's something like greed, aversion, or delusion. Why do you like it even though part of you knows it's wrong? Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks, and as long as you don't quite see what the real allure is, why you're really going for it, then no matter how much you tell yourself to let go, it's like trying to shake tar off of your hand. It's going to hold on.

So you have to be very still. This is why concentration and discernment have to go together. Be very still to watch when the mind goes for something: Why does it go? What does it think it's getting out of it? And the reasons are going to differ from person to person. This is why the Buddha didn't teach a technique for vipassana. He told you, "These are the questions you ask: 'To what extent is this fabrication? To what extent can I trust it? To what extent do I realize that it's an activity I don't want to engage in anymore?'"

Those are the questions you ask as you anupassana, as you follow the thread of inconstancy, as you follow the thread of stress or the thread of not-self, until the mind learns how to be perfectly fine with letting go. If you try to let go of things when you don't have the concentration, the mind feels lost. It thrashes around. Which is one of the reasons why the Buddha said to keep track of the breath as you're keeping track of these other things at the same time. You don't leave the breath. It's just that the questions you ask get more sophisticated, more subtle.

Ajaan Lee's image is of cutting down a forest. That's concentration. Then insight is burning all the logs. It's the same forest, just that what you do with it gets more subtle and gets more effective, gets more thorough in getting rid of stress in the mind—because even just concentration can get rid of a lot of stress, but insight gets rid of more. And both are centered on this process of anupassana, keeping track, following the thread of the breath, following the thread of the mind's fabrications, seeing when they're worth holding onto and when they're not. That's why it's all one practice. The questions develop, and the results will develop too.

So stick with your friend. The breath is the friend that enables all of this to happen. Try to get on good terms with it. As for the things that come up aside from that, remember that you're sticking with this one thread, and you don't want the other threads to distract you or pull you away.