

A Touchstone at the Breath

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The Buddha never taught bare attention. The only types of attention he talked about were two: appropriate and inappropriate. In other words, even the way you pay attention falls under the categories of skillful and unskillful karma. You can pay attention in a way that causes suffering, or you can pay attention in a way that helps alleviate suffering. So you want to know what kind of attention helps alleviate suffering.

With just that much understanding, you can listen to the Buddha's teachings. He would often begin his talks by saying, "Listen and pay careful attention." He didn't mean simply listen to each word, pay attention to each word. He also meant, "Bring appropriate questions to what I'm saying. How does this teaching apply to your understanding of suffering and how does it apply to your understanding of how to put an end to suffering?" Those are the kinds of question he wanted you to bring.

As for other questions—like, "What am I? What kind of person am I? Am I a good person or bad person? Do I exist? Do I not exist? Do I have a self? Do I not have a self? Where have I come from? Where am I going?"—put those aside, he said. Just focus on this one question: "Where's the suffering right now, and how does this teaching help me to understand it, help me understand how to put an end to it?"

Now, that may seem like a lot—he's essentially asking people to bring right view to the talks, even before they've probably heard of right view. But, as he said, everyone has this question when they suffer: "Is there someone out there who knows a way to put an end to the suffering?" This is one of our most primordial questions. Even before we knew how to put things into words, that was one of our desires.

As long as you tap into that primordial desire, you're ready to listen to his teachings. The problem is that people bring other issues in, insisting that the Buddha satisfy whatever other agendas they have: philosophical, political, whatever. When they do that, they can't really listen to his teachings. They can't pay careful attention. They can't pay appropriate attention to what he is saying. So always keep this in mind as you listen to the Dharma. The question is: "How does this apply to my understanding of suffering, and how does it teach me to help put an end to that suffering?"

So, where are you suffering right now? It's useful, in order to understand this, to get in touch with your body. This is a principle that applies to a lot of listening to Dhamma in the forest tradition. And I wouldn't be surprised if it applied back in the Buddha's time. Stay focused on your breath while you're listening, because right here is where everything is happening. The breath is your anchor in the present moment. It gets you in touch with how you experience the body, how you experience the mind. It's in this direct experience where you have to comprehend suffering. You don't comprehend it by theorizing about it, or thinking about it in the abstract. You look at it as it's actually happening. You want to be with the breath so that you can look—the breath here meaning all of the breath energy in the body. If you're going to look at suffering, you need a solid place to stand. If you're going to listen to the Buddha's words, you need a touchstone in order to see: How does this apply to me right now?

Get in touch with the elements in the body. The first one to get in touch with is the breath. How are you breathing right now? How do you feel the breath in your body? If it feels constricted, if your awareness of the body feels tight and limited, what thoughts are limiting it? What other concerns do you have? We've talked about using perception to reframe the issues in your mind. It's not just an intellectual exercise. It's also a physical exercise: reframe your understanding of the breath. The breath is not just raw experience here. You've got ideas that are already affecting your experience. It's a common misunderstanding that first we have a raw feeling, and then we put words on it, and that's the only way those two phenomena interact. Actually, we also have feelings based on words. If you're identifying with your body, of course you're going to react in a certain way. You're going to feel things in a certain way. If you change the idea, you find yourself feeling different things.

So as you're exploring this issue of what they call name and form—mental events and physical events—remember that the interaction goes both ways. The breath, though, is a good way to get a handle on a lot of the mental events that bedevil the mind because often they put you in a Catch-22 situation. No matter how you react to a particular idea, it's going to make you suffer. You get into a discussion with that idea. Like that old question: "Have you stopped beating your wife?" If you answer the question, you've automatically fallen into a really bad way of framing your life. So you have to question the frame. A good easy way to question the frame is to get out of those frames altogether. Get back into the breath. Get back into the body. Explore how you understand the body. This is a good place to understand your perceptions and the impact they have on your feelings.

As for the ideas that come up in the mind, let them go, let them go, let them go for the time being. Watch them come, watch them go, while you stay with the breath. The more sensitive you get to the breath energy that flows in the body, the more you'll be able to see the impact of these different ideas. Breath awareness helps to act as a solvent on the glue that sticks a lot of our ideas together. If you believe A, then it means you believe B, and then it means you believe C, and they all become a cluster. The cluster gets bigger and bigger until it's overwhelming. It takes over your whole worldview. But if you can use the breath as a solvent on that glue, you begin to see there's just this idea and then there's that idea, and there's that other idea. You take them on one by one, and you begin to see: This idea brings stress. This idea doesn't bring stress. You start relating to the life of the mind in a whole different way. You're able to step outside of it.

So this should always be your touchstone: How do things feel in the breath energy part of the body? From there, you can go to the other elements, first using the breath to understand the fire element. Use it to understand the water element. During this heat wave, it's good to explore the water element as much as you can. Where are the cool sensations in the body? That's your first entry into the water element. What can you do with those sensations? How can you use them? You focus on them and think of the coolness then spreading from the point where you're focused, so that even though other parts of the body may be warm, you're staying with cool parts. That teaches you something about perception right there.

Then there are the solid parts, and then the space that surrounds the body, the space that's in the cavity of the nose, the cavities of the ears, the mouth. Or you can think of the space between all the atoms in the body. Actually, each atom is filled with space. There's a lot of space between the atoms. What happens when you hold that perception in mind? It's easiest to do this when the breath gets very, very still, and the other elements are in balance, so that you're not worried about whether the body is too hot or too cold, the breath energy isn't too out of whack. In other words, if there's too much breath energy, you start getting dizzy, lightheaded. If there's too little, everything feels clumped up and solid.

So try to get the physical elements in balance. Just think: balance. What would balance be? Give things a chance to find their balance. When everything gets balanced and the breath is very still, then you can start thinking about space. As you hold that perception in mind, you realize that space is not just between the atoms in your body, it's between the atoms in the floor you're sitting on, it's between the atoms in the air, the atoms in the walls around you. It heads out in all directions with no limitation at all. That's pretty cool. It's a good place to stay.

I've told you that story about the old woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang meditating one night. A voice came into her head, saying, "You're going to die tonight." She said, "Well, if I am going to die, let's die sitting up. Let's die like a warrior." So she continued sitting in meditation. As she told me, all of a sudden, all the elements in the body went way out of whack. No matter what she could do—she had learned how to play with the elements—nothing was working. It really seemed like everything was ready to fall apart. Her image was like being in a house on fire. There was no room you could go into. So what do you do? She suddenly thought of space. So she focused on space. That was the safe escape.

After a while, she realized everything had settled back to normal. She didn't die. But she learned a good lesson: You can go to space. Or better, you can just focus on consciousness, your awareness of the space. But to do that, you need to have practice in maintaining that perception of space, space, space, all the time.

So right here in your experience of the body is when you learn about the other aggregates as well: the feeling aggregate, the perception aggregate, fabrication, and consciousness. It's when your attention is rooted in this awareness of the body from the inside that you can begin to see how those other aggregates function, and particularly how perception and fabrication can totally change the way you experience the body, and how being grounded in the body helps give you a different perspective on perception and fabrication.

So this should be your touchstone: How are you relating to the elements in the body? How are you relating to the sense of the body as felt from inside, what the Buddha calls the form level. When you start exploring the other aggregates as they relate to this, questions may come up, especially when you're trying to understand how can you minimize the suffering here, how can you minimize the stress here.

That's when you might want to turn to read the Dhamma to get some perspective on the skill you're developing. If you simply read the Dhamma in the abstract, it becomes abstract philosophy. You can sit around and talk about it: Is there a self? Is there no self? Did the Buddha say there was a self or not? What does the Buddha have to say about the world? Actually the Buddha said, that kind of thinking gets you involved in all kinds of problems.

This is one area where the postmodernists are right. You have a theory about the nature of the world. You have a theory about what people are. Well, other people are people and they have theories about what people are. If you try to impose your view on them, of course they're going to resent it. It really is kind of a power-play: "I want the world to be understood in the way I want it to be understood." But then the world rebels. Other people rebel. That kind of discussion, that kind of argumentation goes nowhere at all.

We had a missionary come up here today, wanting to know if we were interested in looking at his spiritual brochures. He said, “Ah, I see, you’re in the midst of a spiritual discussion, so I guess we can agree that looking at spiritual material is a worthwhile thing, right?” We just kind of looked at him. He said, “Well, maybe not.” He left us alone. Because that kind of discussion goes nowhere. Those were the kind of views that the Buddha opposed: abstract, cosmological. His views were meant as therapy.

I remember receiving a letter once from a Buddhist scholar, objecting to the idea that maybe the not-self teaching was just a strategy. He said, “The Buddha wasn’t just teaching therapy. He was teaching a philosophy.” So I wrote back, “No, the Buddha wasn’t teaching just a philosophy. He was teaching therapy. He’s offering a way out of suffering. He’s not imposing it on anybody.” He said, in effect, “Look, you can do this, and you’ll find that you won’t suffer.” That kind of view is useful. And compassionate.

When you’re listening to his teachings, the questions aimed at ending suffering are the questions you want to bring to it. Those are also how you want to make sense out of the huge mass of material the Buddha left behind: not by creating a world view, but by realizing you’ve got a huge fund of knowledge on how to deal with suffering in its different forms and its different guises, and on different levels of the practice. All the teachings are meant to be used. Where? Right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath.

So try to make this the point from which you come—this awareness of the body, awareness of the breath, awareness of the mind, right here at the breath. When other issues come up, you may want to look at the texts, but always take the answers and try to relate them back here. See where they’re relevant, where they are not. Are you ready for a particular teaching yet? If you apply it to where you are at the breath, that’s when you know. If it’s not working for you right now, just put it aside. Tell yourself, “Maybe it’s meant for somebody else, or maybe it’s meant for me at another time in my practice.” There’s no need to pass judgment on everything all at once. The only judgment you’re interested in right now is trying to figure out what’s going to work for you right here, right now. What do you need to learn, what do you need to give up? What do you need to develop? Those are the questions to ask.

That’s how you pay appropriate attention to what’s happening right here, right now. You listen to the teaching. When you apply it in your practice, when you learn things from your practice, use the questions of appropriate attention: “Where’s the stress? What’s causing it? What can I do to put an end to it? How can I comprehend the stress? How can I let go of the cause? How do I develop the

path so that I can realize the end of suffering?” That’s the kind of attention you want to bring both to the act of listening to the Dhamma and in the act of practicing the Dhamma.

And your focal point is always right here. Because right here is where the problem is arising, and right here is where it’s going to be solved.