

The Primacy of the Mind (2)

June 22, 2021

All phenomena are preceded by the mind or the heart: the first verse in the Dhammapada. Last night I talked about how people tend to forget this verse when they come to meditation—forgetting the active role of the mind. Tonight I'd like to talk a little bit more about the topic because the principle is there not only in that first verse, it's throughout the Buddha's teachings. After all, with the four noble truths, when the Buddha searches out the causes of suffering, they don't come from outside—they come from within. It's because of the craving, the ignorance, that the mind creates suffering for itself.

When you look at dependent co-arising, you find the same thing: Almost half of the factors are prior to sensory contact, our knowledge of the world. Among those factors are fabrications—your intentional acts, and acts of attention: the things you pay attention to and the way you pay attention. These will determine what you see as you make contact with the world, what you hear, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch, what you think. These things are all shaped by factors inside the mind, acting prior to your experience of the outside world.

Which is why we meditate. If the causes of suffering were outside, we'd be sending you outside to search them down. But they're here, inside. We have to keep that point in mind. The Buddha's teachings on breath meditation underline this. We're not watching just the breath, we're watching the process of *fabrication*, the processes of *attention*, as we watch the breath.

I know people who say, "Why watch the breath? When you die there won't be any breath to watch, so what will you hold on to then?" But in the way the Buddha teaches breath meditation in the four tetrads of the sixteen steps, the big issue is fabrication. As you dig a little deeper, you find one of the big issues is also attention. The Buddha wants you to see how intentions and acts of attention shape your experience even of something as basic as the breath. Based on that, they shape your general experience of well-being or not-well-being. He wants you to see this so that you can alert yourself to exactly how much of your suffering you're bringing to the situation. All too often we look outside, thinking that we're suffering because of this person, or that person, this group of people, that group of people. But you can try to straighten out the world as much as you like, and there's still going to be suffering—because the mind is still churning it out.

So, as we sit here watching the breath, we're getting close to the real problem. Just learn how to look inside: That's when you find where the problem really is. Then, when you see the real problem, that's when you can solve it.

In the first tetrad of the instructions for breath meditation, the Buddha has you start out by discerning short breathing and long breathing. That should alert you to the fact that the way you breathe will have an impact on how you experience the body. Of course, short and long can be spread out to include: deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. Get a sense of the variations in the breath. Then the Buddha has you be aware of the breath in the whole body: Be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. The fourth step is to calm bodily fabrication. Bodily fabrication is basically the in-and-out breath.

You may want to know: Why does the Buddha bring in a technical term here? It's because he wants you to see the extent to which the mind's intentions play a role in how you breathe. We learn from other places that when you get sensitive to fabrication, you first use it to energize the body, energize your sense of the body, and then you calm it down.

So, you're basically asking yourself to be careful about the intentional element that shapes the way you breathe. Then try to be as gentle as possible, as *calming* as possible.

At the same time, you're going to be dealing with feelings. When we see the four tetrads laid out on the page, it looks as if you have to go through the first tetrad, and then the second tetrad, then the third, then the fourth—but the Buddha explains them separately.

When you look more carefully at them, you realize you're doing them in parallel: While you're dealing with the body, you're also dealing with feelings, so you try to breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment, breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to pleasure. How do you do that? The Buddha says that your careful attention to the breath is what's going to give rise to the sense of pleasure. So again, the mind's contribution is what's going to make the difference.

We're working here not with feelings willy-nilly. We're working with what the Buddha calls feelings not-of-the-flesh: *nivāmisā vedanā*. Those are feelings that are consciously, deliberately created. So again, we're working *from* the mind *into* the breath.

Then you're sensitive to how that sense of pleasure has an impact on the mind: You breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication—in other words, feelings and perceptions.

So, what perceptions do you apply to the breath? How do you visualize the breath to yourself, how do you depict it to yourself as you breathe in, as you breathe out, where it's coming in, where it's going out, how it comes in, how it goes out?

You may think of breath as something from the outside and that you have to pull in. You can breathe in a way that's comfortable with that perception, as long as you think of the whole body as being open to the breath coming in, going out. After a while, though, you begin to realize an even more calming perception is of the breath originating from inside. After all, it's the energy in the body that pulls the air in. The air is not going to force its way in on its own.

Where does that energy originate? Ajaan Lee lists a couple of what he calls “resting spots” of the breath: above the navel, at the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, the palate, the middle of the head, the top of the head. Experiment to see which of these centers is most

congenial for you to place your attention on, and then think of the breath radiating out without any interference. If any sense of tension gets in the way, think of it dissolving away. So again, it's the way you pay attention to these feelings along with your intention to calm the mind: This is what shapes your experience right now.

Then you can find an even more calming perception: Think of all the cells of the body breathing together at the same time. No one cell is more predominant than any other, no one spot in the body is more predominant than any other. That's even more calming, both for the body, and for the mind.

Then you get to the third tetrad, which you're actually doing at the same time: being sensitive to the state of the mind and then noticing: When does it need to be gladdened, energized? When does it need to be steadied and made more concentrated? How do you release the mind from any of its burdens? You're doing this all at the same time that you're dealing with body and feelings.

These are all issues that will be determined by attention and fabrication—attention and intention. It's what the mind *brings* to the practice that's going to make a difference. As you learn these lessons from the breath, you learn them in a very immediate and visceral way—and then you can apply them wherever you go. After all, the breath goes with you wherever you go, and you can take your sensitivity to what you're doing wherever you go as well. This way, you keep your focus at the right spot.

Of course, you're aware of what other people are doing, aware of what's going on outside, but you don't let that obscure your knowledge of what you're doing inside—because that's where the real problem is. As long as you allow this inside area to be obscured, you're going to suffer—no matter how perfect things may be outside.

But if we can be knowledgeable about what we're bringing—honest with ourselves, open with ourselves, there's a chance for us to see what we're doing and to stop creating the suffering. This is why when the Buddha was teaching Rahula, the very beginning of the lesson was honesty. And from there, being self-observant: What are you doing? What do you expect to gain from your intentions? Which ones should you act on? When you act only on skillful intentions, what happens? If something bad comes up you have to ask yourself: "Maybe my intention was good, but it wasn't skillful." Go back to the drawing board.

So you reflect. Remember the Buddha's image to Rahula: Your actions are like a mirror. It's through your actions that you can see your own mind. And it's because the mind is the forerunner of all things, it's also the forerunner of suffering—and you can see where it's coming from in the mind. It's also the forerunner of creating the path—you want to be able to observe that as well.

The breath is a good mirror for the mind: Whatever intentions come up, whatever acts of attention come up, they're going to be reflected in how you experience your breath. But we tend to look past this mirror and, as a result, we don't see ourselves.

So try to keep the mirror polished and keep your eye on the mirror—because all the things you need to know are going to be seen right here.