

Sensitive to the Mind

December 25, 2021

We practice concentration to get the mind in one place—right here. There are different ways of doing that. The breath is home base: Of all the meditation methods that the Buddha taught, this is the one he taught in most detail because it helps to clarify a lot of the big issues in the mind, especially around the issue of fabrication, or *saṅkhāra*.

You've got the breath itself: which is *bodily fabrication*. All the different instructions—"I'll breathe this way, I'll breathe that way": Those are *verbal fabrications*. Then there are *mental fabrications*: the perceptions that hold you with the breath, and then the feeling-tones that you give rise to by the way you breathe. These are all very explicit in the instructions.

And of course, when you're with the breath you're guaranteed that you're in the present moment. But there are times when the mind is not willing to settle down with the breath, and it needs some variety. That's when you can bring in other themes to think about.

One is thinking about the body: the different parts you've got in here. A lot of people think that this meditation is specifically for monastics who need to overcome lust, but it's good for everybody.

But you have to do it right: There are cases in the Canon where monks were doing body contemplation when the Buddha wasn't around. They started getting so disgusted with their bodies that they ended up hiring assassins or committing suicide. When the Buddha came out of seclusion, he found that there were a lot fewer monks than there had been before. He called the remaining monks together and said, "When unskillful states come up in the mind, go back to the breath."

But body contemplation doesn't have to give rise to unskillful states. It can help give you a sense of *samvega*, dismay over all the things you do in life just to keep this body going. It has all these needs, and it constantly demands your attention. It's like a little baby that won't let you sleep: crying about this, crying about that, hungry for this, pained here, pained there. It needs to move, needs to go defecate, needs to go urinate—all these things you have to do for it.

And then what does it do? It grows old, gives you more pains, then it gets sick. Once you've got this body, you're open to all kinds of attacks from outside. If you didn't have a body, nobody could hit you. You wouldn't get cold; you wouldn't get hot. It exposes you to all kinds of things—so think about that.

Then you think about what you've got in here. This is where the analysis of the 32 parts of the body comes in. You can think about its hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow... down the list. All that activity, all that concern for these things that are just material objects. And if you took them out and arranged them on the floor, no matter how nicely you arranged them, you'd still want to run away.

Yet when they're all sewed up inside, you let them run your life. This is a good way of thinking about issues in life in general. Ajaan Lee, in his early teachings, before he taught breath meditation, his instructions for concentration would start with contemplations of things like this, like contemplation of the body, to give rise to a sense of *samvega* so that the mind would be willing to settle down. If distracting thoughts then came up, you'd see right through them because you'd already contemplated the issues.

Then where does the body lead? It leads to death. And then where will you be? You'll be totally dependent on the qualities you've developed in the mind. This thought gets the mind more and more willing to want to stay with the breath, to actually come back. Because as the Buddha teaches mindfulness of death, he doesn't have you go around thinking death, death, death, death, death all the time. He has you think about, "Okay, what do I need to prepare? I need to develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment." Where are you going to find those qualities? By being with the breath. This way you lasso the mind in. You want to get it so that it's willing to settle down.

Other times, it needs something more positive to get it to settle down. This is where you think about the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, about how fortunate we are that this tradition has been maintained through all these years: the tradition of someone who really put his life on the line to find something that was more than the ordinary.

Stop and think about how audacious the Buddha was: He aimed at nothing less than total freedom from aging, from illness, from death. Only that would satisfy him. And he tested himself again and again and again until finally he found that dimension—and then he taught it for free.

He went around all over northern India, wherever there were people who were ready to learn, and he would teach them and then move on, move on. He was the embodiment of wisdom, compassion, purity. And he showed how it was done. He said, "This is how you develop your wisdom. This is how you develop your compassion. This is how you develop your purity". He left the instructions behind, the people who followed them found that they were useful, and so they passed them on. And here we are, the recipients of all that, so we want to practice

those teachings and gain benefit from them so that we can pass them on to others as well.

You hear so much about how with the changes in electronics, changes in the media, we live in a totally new world where the past is irrelevant. But people are still suffering from aging, illness, and death. They're still suffering from greed, aversion, and delusion—and the way to solve those problems was found a long time ago. So that's a tradition that's worth maintaining.

So look at your mind: When the Buddha talks about the steps of breath meditation that deal with the mind, the very first one is to be sensitive to the mind as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Notice what it needs. But you don't just sit there being sensitive. You ask yourself, "How is the mind out of balance? Is it willing to settle down? Or is it not willing to settle down? And what kind of antidote would be good? What can you do to gladden the mind? What can you do to concentrate the mind? What can you do to release the mind?"

Try to have a range of skills in your repertoire, both for the sake of variety and for the sake of realizing that the mind has lots of different issues. Maybe dealing with the breath is not going to cover all of them, but the Buddha has other methods, so that this is an all-around training.

So look into what the mind needs right now, and remember that you have lots of different skills you can work with. If you haven't mastered them yet, well, here's a chance to master them. When you think in these ways, every meditation session can be rewarding. It may not be as quiet as you like, the mind may not get as still as you like, but you're gaining an understanding, and that's why we're here. Remember, it's through understanding that suffering is brought to an end. This is why the Buddha explained things so much, because as he said, everything has the mind as the forerunner. It's the mind's understanding that's going to determine how things go.

Which is why it was worthwhile for him to teach. He tried to change people's understanding in such a way that they would not only see things in a useful way, but also feel inspired to follow through. It's not like understanding, say, a math problem where you figure it out and then you're done with it. You figure this out and you see what needs to be done, in a very general way, and then you go for the particulars because there's work to be done in the particulars.

The mind is suffering, the mind has stress, and you can't just sit there and watch it be stressed out, you can't sit and watch it suffering. After all, as the Buddha said, there are *four* noble truths. There's not just the truth of suffering, And he didn't say, *Life is suffering*, he said, *Suffering is in the clinging. The clinging comes from craving, and there is a path to practice that can put an end to that*

craving. When you know that much, it should stir you to want to master that path.

Simply realize that it may take longer than you might have expected, and there may be more twists and turns to the path... actually, the path doesn't have a lot of twists and turns, but the *mind* has a lot of twists and turns. The path sometimes does have its paradoxical nature, where you develop something and then have to abandon it, or you're focused on one thing and then you realize you have to turn around and look at your mind as it's focused. So it is a subtle path, but again, the Buddha pointed out that this is how you develop subtlety in the mind: Get the mind to settle down. Get it used to being really, really still, and you'll see things in the mind you didn't see before.

I received a letter recently from a prisoner who'd been reading some neuroscientists who said that the brain actually makes decisions without our knowing what's going on, and we're aware of it only later. But that's the opposite of what the Buddha said. So who's right? Well, the Buddha was looking at a trained mind with a trained mind, and he could see that the mind does make the decisions, it does shape things—but then it often lies to itself or pretends that the decision hasn't been made. Or it makes a decision on automatic pilot, someplace buried inside—while it pays attention a little bit, just enough to make the decision and then forget about it.

But as you get more and more into what's going on in the present moment, you get better and better at seeing: This is the point where decisions are made; this is the point where the mind hides that fact from itself and then finally admits to itself a little bit later. It's because we're here at the present moment that we can see these things as they're happening and get more control over what the mind does.

So when we operate with that understanding, the understanding of right view, then even though we may not *know* yet, at least we have the conviction that this is the way out. We apply that conviction and begin to see that it really works. It really is true. We see for ourselves what's going on in our own minds.

That's what it's all about: You're sensitive to your mind not only as a preliminary stage in the meditation. The whole meditation is about becoming sensitive to the mind—what it needs—and the Buddha's simply giving you tools so that you can provide for those needs on more and more subtle levels.

So look at each meditation as a learning experience. You may not learn what you wanted to to begin with, you may learn some things about yourself that you decide you don't like, but the fact that you see these things means that you can do something about them.

Otherwise, the mind buries things from itself. As the ajaans say, one of the first things you realize as you're watching your mind is how much it lies to itself. The meditation is all about learning how to dig up the truth and tell the truth to yourself, so that you can benefit from those truths.

Because we're here not simply to arrive at the truth, we're here to *use* truths to get to something that goes beyond them—a truth of a different sort, but something that's eminently worth going for. Always keep that in mind.