

Breathing through Daily Life

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The mind is always working. If it were doing just one or two jobs at a time, that would be no big problem. But it's usually juggling several jobs at once. No wonder it's tired. Relationships, responsibilities, jobs, issues: Lots of things are going on in the mind all at once. Often when we start meditating it seems like the meditation is just one more ball to keep in the air, one more thing you've got to juggle. So there's no wonder that when people leave the monastery and start trying to juggle the meditation along with everything else, they drop some of the balls. And usually it's the meditation ball that gets dropped.

The alternative is to think of the meditation as a way of cutting down on the jobs of the mind. The practice as a whole is a way of cutting down on the jobs, and the meditation gives you a place to stand and do your more focused work. So instead of making the breath a job, you make it the place where the mind stands. It's good to get practice in this. This is why you need to have time away from your daily life so that you can get used to taking the breath as your foundation, lowering your center of gravity so that you stay with the breath at all times. In Pali, the word for the object of the meditation, *arammana*, literally means "support." It's the support for the mind. It's what the mind sits on, where the mind stands. So at first you have to put some work into getting that foundation solid. Once it's solid, though, you can stand on it; it gives you support. Then you can take on the other issues in life.

One of the purposes of meditation is to put you in a position where you can see which issues are really worth taking on and which ones are not. Being with the breath helps here in that it makes you more and more sensitive to the movements of the mind, more sensitive to what you're doing, to where there's wasted energy. At the same time, the breath gives you a place where you stand apart a bit from the activities of the world, so that you see them in a new light. Again, this is one of the reasons why you have to come out and take some time away from those activities, to get used to looking at things in that light, from the point of view of an outsider, someone who's not totally involved, not totally taken in.

The Buddha recommended that his monks go off into the wilderness, places where they could get away from people, so they could have a chance to evaluate what's really worthwhile in life. You try to develop what might be called a deathbed perspective: Suppose you're lying on your deathbed, looking back on your life. What things are you going to wish you had done? What things are you going to wish you hadn't? Learn to look at your life as a whole in that way,

choosing your priorities, instead of just taking on whatever little bits and pieces are thrown up at you in day-to-day-to-day activities. Otherwise, your life gets frittered away in meaningless things, trivial pursuits, and the important issues get pushed to the side. But when you step out for a while, you begin to get a sense of your life as a whole. What do you want to do with it? What's a worthwhile use of your time?

Often you hear of people who are told by the doctor that they have, say, two or three months left to live, and suddenly they start dropping a lot of unimportant activities to focus on the things they find really important in life. It's good that they're getting focused in this way; the shame is that they had to wait until the last three months of their lives. One of the purposes of meditation is to let you step back from your life while you still have time (as far as you know), so it's not just three months that are lived wisely with a sense of their importance. You can live your whole life with a sense of its importance, with a sense of direction.

Even if you decide that you want to stay involved in your ordinary activities, still you're doing it from a different perspective – you've got that foundation from the time you spent separately. You carry that perspective with you as a foundation developed with the breath as your support. As a result, you don't have to juggle so much, and you have a more solid place to stand when you do have to juggle the affairs of daily life. You can see which balls are worth dropping, which are not really worth trying to keep in the air, so that you can focus on what's really important.

So even though the meditation is work – and that's what the word *kammattana* means, it's our work as meditators, the object we're focusing on – don't think of it as one more burden to add to the mind. It's a new, more secure place for the mind to stand, a place where it can get a better sense of its priorities. That way, when you leave the monastery and go back into everyday activities, you've got a foundation to take with you.

So get to know the breath. Learn to be on good terms with it. If you're not on good terms with the breath, if you seem to be fighting it all the time, it's not going to become a good foundation. This means giving it some time to show itself for what it is. You can nudge it a little bit here or there. If it seems too long, you can make it a little bit shorter. If it seems too short, make it a little bit longer. If it needs to be deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter – whatever – you can nudge it in those directions. But then give it some time to show its results once it's been nudged. If you want it to be your friend, you have to be friends with it. You have to give it a chance to speak for itself. You have to listen.

Listen carefully to what the breath energy in the body is telling you right now. What kind of energy feels good for the body? Sometimes when you're tired you want good long in-breaths to energize the body. When you're feeling tense, you might try long out-breaths, to let the tension dissolve away. You may find that certain parts of the body that haven't been involved in the breathing process

really would like to get involved, or it would feel good for them to get involved (they, of course, don't have any opinions on the matter). But if you learn to read the sensations from your body, you can tell which parts of the body are lacking breath energy. Think of the breath going to them for the next breath, and then the next, until that part of the body feels full. Then search for any other parts of the body that could use some good breath energy. Let them get involved in the breathing, too.

So even though this is work, it's work in establishing a foundation. And while you're here, it's the only thing you have to worry about. You have no other responsibilities; just be in touch with the breath, the way the breath feels. How far does the sensation of the breath go down into the body? Examine it: Is there any line in the body where you say, "This part is breath and this part is not breath"? Or do you have a sense that the whole body could be involved in the breathing process? Explore this so as to get to know the breath, to listen to the breath. The more carefully you listen to it, the more you learn about it. And the more you learn about it, the more it can be your friend to help you with all the various jobs the mind has to undertake.

So while you're here, you don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk – just listen to your breath. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Use your imagination. Say, "Well, how about breathing like that? How about breathing like this?" and then see what happens. This way you get to know the breath in ways you might not have otherwise. If you don't experiment, there's no knowledge gained. You don't know why things happen. But if you know that if you change the breath in this way you got those results, you change the breath in that way you got these results: That's knowledge. It comes from participating. It comes from acting. It comes from doing.

At the same time, there has to be a part of the mind that just watches, just evaluates, observes. So you're learning from a combination of two factors: your improvisation, using your ingenuity in adjusting the breath to make it feel better; and then your powers of observation to see what works and what doesn't. When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, these were the two words he used more than any others when giving meditation instructions: to improvise (the word he used, *patiphaan*, also means "ingenuity," your ability to experiment) and to be observant – to see what works, what doesn't."

This way you develop a friendship with the breath. When you're friends with the breath, you feel at home with it; it's a good place to stay. When you get used to staying here, then it really can become your foundation. When you leave the monastery and go back out to your daily life, you've got a solid place to stand. You're not constantly buffeted around by what other people are saying or doing. You've got your inner foundation, your inner refuge.

As long as you're on good terms with the breath, that's the best relationship you can have. Other relationships come and go. Even our family comes and goes. As long as you're alive, the mind has to be on good terms with the body, the

body should be on good terms with the mind. All our relationships in life are based on how well the body and mind relate to each other. When you're on good terms with your breath, it's easier to be on good terms with other people. When you have goodwill for the breath, it teaches you how to have goodwill for others. At the same time, when the body and mind are working together, they get their work done. They aren't fighting at cross-purposes. In this way they validate each other. You don't have to go looking for outside validation; you've got your inner validation as to what feels right, what feels good, because you're really observant. As you develop your powers of observation, they get more and more reliable.

So try to be sensitive to what's going on here in the body, going on in here in the breath. It may require work, it may be a job that you're not used to, but as you get more and more used to it, it becomes more and more second-nature. Then you find that it really is a helper, it really is an assistant in whatever other work you've got to do. In other words, when you're driving the car, you're standing in the breath driving the car. When talking to other people, you're staying in the breath talking to other people. All your activities get brought into the breath in this way. The breath becomes the foundation that underlies them all – the solid floor on which you stand so you can juggle your activities with skill. And with a continuous foundation like this, your life isn't chopped up into little bits: a little time for this, a little for that. It all becomes time to be with the breath, and then to work from the breath on whatever else you need to do in the course of the day.