

Permission to Play

March 16, 2009

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in; know when it's going out. Notice where you feel it, the sensations that tell you when it's coming in and going out, and then keep your attention focused on those sensations. You have to be careful, though, in how you focus. If you put too much pressure on the breath, it starts getting constricted. If your attention to the breath is too light, it slips off and floats away. So find just the right amount of pressure to maintain on the breath—here meaning the pressure of your attention—but allow the breath to flow as freely as possible in the body.

We often make the mistake of tensing up around something in order to highlight it in our attention or to stay focused on it, but that'll get in the way of the breath's being a pleasurable place to stay. Which is what you need as you meditate—a good place to stay—because if the mind doesn't find any sense of ease in the present moment, it's going to go wandering off looking for ease and pleasure someplace else.

So experiment with the breathing. You can do it in one of two ways. The first is simply to pose the question in your mind with each breath: "What kind of breathing would feel really good right now?" See how the body responds. Or you can go about it more systematically. To expand your sense of what the breath is capable of, ask yourself: "What would longer breathing feel like?" And think of the breath going longer for a while. Then how about still longer: What would that feel like? And then go shorter, deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter. Try to push the envelope until you gain a sense of what kind of breathing really does feel good right now.

It's important that you learn how to play with the breath in this way. This may seem counterintuitive. After all, we're trying to get to something unconditioned and unfabricated and yet here we go about it by fabricating. But that's what the whole path is: a kind of fabrication. Every factor of the noble eightfold path, from right view through right concentration, is something put together. It's a fabrication. It's something you *will* through bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication: i.e., through the breath, through directed thought and evaluation, and through feeling and perception. But to will skillfully, you have to bring these fabrications together in a way that makes the path pleasant to follow. Otherwise you can't stick with it. This is why right concentration is such an important part of the path. It gives you a good place to stay—a sense of ease, wellbeing, refreshment, or rapture that nourishes and sustains your ability to stick with the path.

So play around with the breath. Think of fabrication as playing, and you have permission to play. Don't think that playing around in this way is going to get in the way of insight. It actually helps create the conditions for insight to arise. For one, it gives stamina to the practice. If you're simply sitting with whatever comes up, meditation becomes an exercise in brute endurance. If no pleasure's coming up in the meditation, no sense of rapture or gratification, it becomes dull and unattractive. You find it harder and harder to actually sit down and keep up with

the practice day after day. But if you allow the meditation to be a process of exploring, of finding what's really comfortable right now, you can stick with it. It becomes something interesting, something you want to do.

As you're sticking with this process of experimenting with the breath, getting it more pleasurable and allowing that sense of pleasure to seep throughout the body, it gives you a steadier base in the present moment. The interest you develop in exploring the breath energy in the body helps you stay steadily in the present as well. If the meditation is simply a matter of watching whatever comes up, it gets boring very quickly. The mind's going to find reasons to do other things, to slip away and find other things that seem more interesting or important. But if you allow yourself to explore, your curiosity makes you want to stay here, to stay sensitive and steadily focused.

At the same time, allowing the breath to be comfortable gives you a safe foundation in the present moment—a foundation you're going to need because pains will come up. We need the right attitude toward pain: not to feel threatened, not to run away. Our duty with regard to pain is to comprehend it, but you're not going to comprehend it if you feel threatened by it. So it's good to know that you have a safe, comfortable place to return to whenever you need it.

Say there's a pain in your leg and you're not really ready to deal with it yet: You can focus on whatever sense of ease and fullness you can develop elsewhere in the body—say, in the chest, in the stomach, in your hands, in your feet—through the way you breathe. If things get bad with the pain, you can go back to the breath. Once the mind feels nourished and protected by the breath, it'll be more willing to actually look into the pain, probe into the pain, trying to understand: What is this pain I have in my body? Why do I fear it so much? Is it really as fearsome as it seems?

As you get interested in exploring the pain, you start taking it apart: Which part of the pain is actually a physical sensation and which part is the mental perception that makes things worse in the mind? And even with that physical sensation: Which part of it actually is a pain? Because you also have sensations of the different elements in your body, which are more like properties of how the body feels from within. There's solidity, liquidity, warmth, and energy. How does the pain relate to those? It's a different kind of sensation. Liquid is just liquid. Solid is just solid. It doesn't have to be painful. In fact, these sensations are a different order of sensation entirely from the pain. But there's a pain flitting around in there. If you glom it together with the physical properties, especially the property of earth or solidity, you make the pain seem a lot more solid and threatening than it actually is.

If you're coming from a position of wellbeing, a position of inner security, it's easier to explore and see these things happening because your agenda isn't necessarily to make the pain go away. You're curious. You want to learn about it.

And as you develop a greater sensitivity to the breathing, a greater sensitivity to how you fashion the breath and how intention plays a role in your experience of the breath, you start seeing more and more subtle levels of stress that you wouldn't have seen otherwise. You see more subtle levels of fabrication that you wouldn't have seen otherwise as well. Because one of the big lessons in the meditation is that the present moment is not a given. You're actually shaping the present moment with your intentions. And the best way to sensitize yourself to

those intentions and their role in fashioning the present is to try to fashion it skillfully.

This way you get a sense of when you should try to change things, and when you shouldn't; which problems in the body or in the mind respond to active intervention, and which ones respond better when you simply watch them with equanimity. As you put the mind in a better mood through giving it a good comfortable place to stay, or giving it something to explore with the breath, it becomes more open to seeing its own mistakes. It can even admit its mistakes with a greater sense of cheerfulness, because it sees that they don't have to be repeated.

If the mind is in a bad mood, it's like a person in a foul mood. If you want to talk to him about where he's been unskillful, where he's been outrageous or whatever in his behavior, he won't want to hear anything you say. He's going to resist. But if he's rested and well fed and in a good mood, it's a lot easier to broach the topic of his shortcomings. And the same with the mind: A lot of what we're going to learn in the process of understanding the mind is in seeing its subterfuges, where it lies to itself, where it's been dishonest with itself, all of which are things we don't like to see. Yet if we don't admit these things to ourselves, insight will never have a chance. You can't just put the mind through a meditation grinder and hope that the process is going to take care of it. The mind has to develop the sensitivity to see where it's been lying to itself, where it's been dishonest with itself, for genuine insight to arise.

So this game we play with the breath helps put you in the right mood to learn those lessons. Try to explore how to get the breath more comfortable, more refined, seeing how still you can get both the breath and the mind without forcing them unnaturally. After all, you're working with a sense of ease, so you can't force it to the point where the ease dies away. This means that you need to develop your powers of sensitivity. You need to have a sense of how much fiddling around becomes too much fiddling around. When the breath gets comfortable enough that you can stay with the body, when it feels good to be with the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, then you just allow it to do its thing. And as the mind calms down, the breath calms down as well.

This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's meditation instructions. You try to get a sense of what fabrication is going on, and then once you're sensitive to the process of fabrication, you allow it to grow still. This gives you some insight into the fact that you're shaping the present moment. You develop the desire to do it with more skill, with more finesse, with a greater sense of sensitivity and subtlety. And you can get there only by consciously trying to fabricate things: fabricating your sense of the body through the breathing, and fabricating your mind through the perceptions you hold.

The sensitivity that develops over time is what allows you to see the subtleties of these processes. If you try to lay down the rule in the beginning that "I'm not going to do anything, I'm just going to watch what's already there," a lot of what's really happening in the present moment goes underground where you can't see it. But as you consciously try to fabricate a sense of wellbeing in the body, a sense of ease in the mind through the way you breathe, through the way you relate to the breath, then you bring these processes up to the surface. You see them more clearly. This brings more honesty into the mind.

So it's important, as you meditate, that you realize you have permission to play, are encouraged to play, with the breath. This is how maturity develops in any field. Children who don't get a chance to play never really mature. The same principle applies to meditators. If you don't learn how to play with the present moment, you never develop a mature understanding of what's going on in the present moment. When you don't really understand the role of intention in forming the present moment, you never get to the point where you can drop every element of intention that's creating the present. And only when you drop the last shred of intention can there be an opening to something outside of the present, beyond space and time, to that happiness we're all looking for, which is totally independent of conditions, totally reliable. And only when we have a reliable happiness can we rely on ourselves.

You see this everywhere now. The economy's collapsing. There are more murders out there, more suicides, more robberies as people's sense of wellbeing gets more and more threatened. This is when you really get to see how strong people's sense of their inner wealth is. The more wealth you have inside, the less you're worried about wealth outside. The less you worry about wealth outside, the more you can trust yourself to do the skillful thing, to say the skillful thing, to think the skillful thing in any situation. If you can train the mind to the point where it's found something that can't be touched by anything in space and time but can be touched through inner awareness—as the Buddha says, you touch it with the body, or you see it with the body; in other words, it's a total experience; it's not just a vision, it's not just an idea, it's visceral: Once you've had your first taste of that, you know you have a happiness you can depend on. This means you can depend on your mind as well. The other pleasures of the world become less important and are less likely to tempt you to do unskillful things to attain them and protect them because you realize you have something that doesn't need protection.

That's where the meditation gets really good. But the only way you can develop the maturity needed to find that mature happiness is the same way any person develops maturity: You start out by playing around, learning about cause and effect by nudging things to see what they do in response. You nudge this cause—i.e., the breath—to see what that does to the mind, what it does to the sense of ease in the body, and then nudge another cause: say, your perception of the breath. If you see the breath only as air coming in and out of the lungs, you're really limiting yourself. Think of other ways you might perceive this energy in the body—flowing through the blood vessels, flowing through the nerves, flowing around the nerves, flowing out to every pore in the skin, flowing around the body just beyond the skin, having everything in and around the body all connecting up. Ajaan Lee's image is of cutting roads through a jungle till you have a whole system of interconnecting roads. Communication gets easier. Information flows more smoothly.

It's by playing around in this way that you start outgrowing your childish attitudes. It's through play that children become adults. So each time you sit down and meditate, remember you have permission to play. It's what the meditation is all about.