

Focal Points

September 7, 2012

Try focusing on a new spot tonight—one that you haven't focused on before. Find some out-of-the-way spot in the body that's been neglected and place your attention there. Whether or not you feel the breath there isn't the issue. Just remind yourself that there is breath there, so whatever you feel there qualifies as breath. You don't have to make it move or do anything special. Just notice it. Aside from that, breathe in a comfortable way.

Or if you like, you can focus on two spots. There was an old retired schoolteacher I knew in Thailand who stayed at Wat Asokaram and had a reputation among the other lay meditators for being really quick in getting into concentration. Another old retired woman who was quite psychic—she could actually check out other people's minds—told me that by the time her own mind had settled down to the point where she could read other people's minds, the schoolteacher had already put her mind firmly into concentration and could just stay there for the entire session. As the schoolteacher told me, her trick was to focus on two spots at once. She described it as focusing on one spot in the middle of the brain and another spot down at the tailbone, and then thinking of a line connecting the two. She said that it was like hooking the electric lines leading from a light bulb to two poles of a battery. As soon as both ends were connected, the bulb would light up. That was her trick for getting concentrated really fast.

So you might try that and see if it works for you. You can choose those same two spots if you like, or any other two spots. The point here is that there's a lot of room for variation in the techniques.

You hear so many times, "Focus your attention on one spot." Yet here's another way of doing it—two spots. You also might look at how you conceive of the focusing, because our notion of focusing is affected so much by the way our eyes work. One of the ways we gain a sense of the three-dimensionality of space around us is in changing the focus of our eyes and seeing what comes into focus, what goes out of focus. Do that for a while and you have a sense of what's near and what's far.

So when you think about focusing on the breath, you may be bringing that habit inside. You may have a mental picture that you, the observer, are right here and the focal point is out there someplace else. So try to bring the focal point in to right where the observer is. In other words, instead of having the focal point ahead of the lens, have it right in the lens and see what that does.

One of the points of experimenting with the meditation like this is to uncover some of the perceptions that underlie the way you're functioning. If you don't ask strange questions about what you're doing or try a few strange variations, you'll never see how strange your underlying assumptions are. For all this time, you thought, "It had to be that way." But it doesn't have to be that way. You can get better results by changing your assumptions.

For the time being, use this as a technique for seeing what works and what doesn't work in getting the mind into concentration. This is where playing with assumptions becomes not just a game, but something of value. You actually get beneficial results out of it. We're not just playing little mental exercises for the fun of it. It can be fun, but it's got a serious purpose: getting the mind to settle down and be steady. You try a variation. Stick with it for a while. See what it does.

It's like experimenting with a recipe. After years and years of following Julia Child, you tell yourself, "Wait a minute. Let's change the seasonings. Let's change the proportions. Why does it have to be the way she says it is?" And in some cases, you'll find there was a good reason for what's in her recipe. In other cases, well, no. It simply had to do with her personal taste. But you have your personal taste and, after all—remember that image of the cook? You're trying to find something that pleases you as you're sitting here meditating: something that keeps you engaged, that engages your imagination and calls a few things into question. So play with the breath as you please.

Many people have trouble staying with the breath or getting in touch with the breath energies in the body because their conception of how their body works is determined by what they're told about how it works: what other people can observe; what a doctor says or what a machine can measure about their breath from the outside. But when you're meditating, you're not looking at the body from outside. You're experiencing it from within, and that means throwing out a lot of your old outside preconceptions, particularly the assumptions that draw on materialism: the idea that you're primarily matter, and only secondarily conscious. If you function totally in a materialistic universe, it's going to make you suffer. And yet when we come to meditation, even though part of us realizes that materialism is a miserable way of thinking, we still carry a lot of materialistic assumptions into the mind. So turn things around. Awareness comes first, the material world later. You're experiencing things from within, and it's exclusively your territory.

You're the expert in here. There's an old Peanuts comic strip where Linus comes up to Lucy and touches her and says, "See how cold my hands are?" She says, "Brrr. Yes, they're cold. But how do you know that they're cold when you're inside them?" Well, you actually know better than anybody else how your body feels from within. In fact, that's something nobody else can know. You're the only one who can. And so it's up to you to explore. Try to give this your full attention. Use some ingenuity and see what happens.

If you don't like focusing on one spot or two spots, or a line between two spots, think of yourself as focusing on every spot in the body. When you breathe in, every cell is breathing in and breathing out. If you're using buddho, every little point in your awareness is shouting, "buddho, buddho." Everything becomes a focal spot. They're all equally there. You're equally present to every spot. Try that and see if it gets you firmly into the present moment.

This is one of the reasons why there are so many different variations on breath meditation even just in the Forest Tradition, to say nothing of the methods outside of the tradition. The ajaans have taught many different types of meditation because each of them was out in the forest alone for long periods of time, dealing with his own breath, dealing with his own mind. When things didn't work, to whom could they go? They had to depend on their own ingenuity and their own powers of observation. This is why Ajaan Fuang used these words over and over and over again, "Be observant. Use your ingenuity. Be observant again. Learn to question your assumptions."

I remember when I first went to Thailand, it was very typical for Westerners to generalize about the Thais, thinking that Thais were very conformist and all thought alike. But I actually found that Thai people were much more individualistic in their views of the world—how things worked—than most of the Americans I knew. Part of this, of course, was because they had less of a standardized formal education. Most of them learned how to read, how to write, how to do arithmetic, and that was it. So they spent the rest of their lives engaging with the world in their own ways, and each person would come up with his or her own way of conceiving that engagement. It was really interesting talking to them, especially the older generation, and getting their ideas about how things worked. Sometimes their ideas were off the mark as far as areas where it didn't really affect their daily lives, but if something affected their daily lives directly, they were extremely observant and extremely ingenious. That's how they survived.

The same principle applies to the meditation. It's a quality we should all develop if we want to survive as meditators. When you're told something, try it out for a while. If it works, stick with it. If it doesn't work, well, flip it around a little bit. Turn it inside out. Try the opposite. Try to conceive of what the "opposite" might be. Maybe your conception of the opposite is a little narrow. Recall those questions that were posed to the Buddha, the hot questions of the day: Is the cosmos eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Other people had come up with all sorts of responses to the questions, taking one side or the other, but the Buddha had a new response, which was that the questions themselves were not even worth asking. It blew their minds.

Well, there's a lot in meditation where you have to learn how to blow your own mind because, after all, when you come to the truths and the realizations that are going to give

you release, they deal with things that have been right here in front of you and yet you haven't seen them. That's because they lie outside your normal frame of thinking. If you just simply plod through the instructions with blinders on your eyes, you're never going to come across anything unexpected. So learn to play with things. Learn to experiment. Some of the experiments won't work, but if they don't, just throw them away. If they do work, you've found something that's really good—something that will help you see and understand things in a new, a more useful way. That's when you know your meditation is working. That's how it progresses.