

## *Adult Education*

*January 13, 2014*

The Buddha's instructions on breath meditation start by having you notice when the breath is long, when it's short. In other words, get sensitive to variations in the breath. When you breathe quickly for a while, what does that feel like? When the breath slows down, what does that feel like? When it's deep, when it's shallow – you try to notice these things.

But then the practice of meditation goes beyond just noticing. In all the remaining steps, he says you train yourself. For instance, you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Some people find they can get that sense of the full body right away. Other people find it's good to go through the body section-by-section first, noticing how the breathing process feels in the different parts of the body. Then when you've explored things section by section, you start putting things together.

Then you train yourself to calm the effect of the breath on the body. Try to get a sense of the breath energy filling your body so that the need for an in-and-out breath grows less and less, and the sense of the breath energy flow in the body gets more and more gentle – not weak, but gentle. It's strong and it's full, but there's a gentleness to it. It feels really good, soothing, calming to be right here with the breath.

And so on with all the other steps of the breath meditation.

And in every case it's a type of training. The word for training, *sikkha*, is also the word they use for education. This is a kind of education here, learning some important skills, because in the course of leaning about the breath you're also going to be learning about your mind – learning about the movements of the mind. Giving the mind one thing to focus on very quickly, you'll notice it's going to focus on other things as well—which you may not have really noticed unless you had given yourself one thing, one task to stick to.

So you learn things about the actions of the mind. As you get really sensitive to the actions of the mind, you begin to see how they come out in terms of your words and deeds and thoughts—and how these things shape your life.

This is all an important education. It's a large part of our formal education that's missing. More and more, you see people calling for an education that trains you to be good workers, that sort of feeds you into the mill. I was reading just the other day an editorial where they're saying that the problem with our country is

that our education system isn't designed to create better workers, as if that was all that was important.

So when the system doesn't really care about whether or not you're going to be happy as a worker, you've got to train yourself to find happiness. And this is what the meditation is: It's a self-education. You learn the basic principles but then you have to train yourself in those principles. And regardless of how old you are, it's important to learn these skills so as to get this education.

We think of life in the first twenty years or so as the time for education and then it's time for work, but that, again, is somebody else's perception and agenda. It doesn't have to be the perception or agenda that you apply to your own life. What kind of education is important for you? What skills do you really want to master? And what's the value of your time? A life spent with a good job is fulfilling for some people and not for others. Especially when you look at your life and you ask yourself, have you learned how to not suffer? Have you learned how to act in ways that are skillful, that don't cause any harm to yourself, don't cause any harm to anyone else? That's a skill, that's an education that's really worth mastering. And the time dedicated to that is not wasted.

So think of your time here as a part of your education. However long it takes to master these skills is all time well spent. Of course the more heedful you are and the more diligent you are in the practice, the more fruitful the time will be.

And always keep in mind the Buddha's four principles for reaching the Deathless. That's something that's really worth reaching. It's a genuine milestone in your education. The first principle is that you try to find people of integrity: people that you can live with, pick up habits from, gain instruction from. That's the second step, that you listen to the true Dharma from these people. And you have to recognize what is true Dhamma and what's not. Because just as we have education for corporations, we now have meditation and Dhamma for corporations—which is not necessarily the Dhamma for individuals.

So you listen to the Dharma and then apply appropriate attention, which means asking, "How this be used to understand stress? How can this be used to understand the nature of actions of the mind to see where they're causing stress, where they're not?—so you can identify the cause and learn how to abandon it. And what are the practices that help you identify and abandon those causes?—so that the stress and suffering that come from your actions, can cease.

Then, when you've applied appropriate attention to these teachings and you've figured out where these various teachings apply and what you should do with them, then the Buddha says, you move on to the fourth step, which is to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: anything that helps you give rise to a

sense of dispassion to the actions you've been doing that cause stress and suffering.

This doesn't refer just to actions outside, of course. It applies primarily to actions in the mind as well: the way you perceive things, the way you construct your thoughts. You learn how to watch these things.

Again, this practice of the breath puts you in a very good place to watch that, because you notice how the way you perceive the breath has a huge impact on how you experience the process of breathing. If you think there are only the two little holes that the breath can come into, the breathing process can become a lot more stressful and take a lot more work. But if you think of the breath as energy coming in from all directions, it's a very open and light process. A lot more nourishing.

Then you apply that knowledge of how your perceptions change things to other areas of your life as well. There are so many perceptions that we take on that cause stress, cause suffering, and yet we like to use them and we like to ignore the stress. But the Buddha says, look at that and ask yourself, is there a better way to act?

This is why it's good to have good examples around. If you're living with a lot of bad examples, all you can think about are the bad options that are all around you. Well, there are better options.

So these four principles—finding people of integrity to study with, listening to the true Dharma, applying appropriate attention, and then practicing the Dharma in line with the Dharma, learning how to change whatever attitudes and habits you have that you find are contributing to the stress and suffering in your life: *These* are the basic principles of a good education. Of course this is adult education, it's not just for kids – of course, it's not just for adults – young people can study this as well. But it's an education that doesn't end when you're twenty or thirty years old. It keeps on going for as long as it may take. But a life dedicated to this kind of education is a life well spent.