

Breath Meditation: The First Tetrad

November 26, 2015

Today's Thanksgiving. It also happens to be the full moon night at the end of the rainy season in the Buddhist calendar, the night when the Buddha gave his discourse on breath meditation. So, let's put the two events together: feeling gratitude to the Buddha for having taught us that we can gain awakening by something so simple as watching our breath. That's not the only good thing that comes from watching the breath. Along the way to awakening, as the Buddha points out, you can use the breath to develop many levels of concentration that provide a comfortable dwelling place for the mind in the present moment. The body also benefits if you focus on the breath in the way that he recommends. So it's good both for body and for mind.

Stop and think. Is this something you would have thought up on your own? It's good to remember that we owe these teachings to the exploration of other people, people like the Buddha, who put his life on the line trying to find a true happiness. He tried various paths, studying with other teachers, realizing that their teachings didn't lead to anything deathless. That was what he wanted: a deathless happiness—and that's something to be grateful to him for as well. He kept his standards high and stretched our ideas of what human beings are capable of.

He saw that everyone was looking for happiness in things that would eventually age, grow ill, and die. They themselves would age, grow ill and die. He himself would age, grow ill, and die. And what would be left? "What was noble about that kind of search?" he asked himself. The only noble search, in his eyes, was one that would lead to something free from aging, free from illness, free from death.

So he kept that as his standard. One of the key factors to his awakening was his unwillingness to settle for second best; an unwillingness to be content, as he said, with skillful qualities. If he felt that there was a way in which he could possibly be even more skillful, he'd go for it. So he studied with two teachers. The teachers didn't satisfy him. He subjected himself to six years of austerities, extreme austerities. That, too, didn't get the results he wanted.

Then he remembered that when he was a child, he'd been sitting under a tree while his father was plowing—a phrase that the later commentaries had to deal with, because they believed that the Buddha's father was a king, and the idea of a king plowing didn't sound right to them, except that he might plow at a royal ceremony at the beginning of the planting season. At any rate, the young prince, or the young Buddha-to-be, was sitting under a tree while his father was plowing. He got into a state of concentration that he later recognized as the first jhana, the first level of right concentration. And the question came to him, "Could that be the right way?" And something inside him said, "Yes."

So he started taking food again to regain the strength he'd need to get into that concentration. Then, on the night of his awakening, he sat down under the Bodhi tree and focused on his breath as a way of stilling the mind. Again, why he thought of that, we don't really know. But it's something to be grateful for, the fact that he was able to find this path, something so simple, something so accessible to all human beings. He pursued it as far as he could go and then taught us how to do it, too.

So it's something to be grateful for. The best way to show our gratitude, of course, is to put it into practice. He went to all that trouble to find a way to share it with others, not so that they would bow down to him, but so that they would actually put it into practice and gain the results. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, the Buddha was not interested in ceremonies. He was more interested in realities. He wanted people to find the reality of the deathless. So this is our way of showing gratitude: by trying to find that reality.

And it's good to keep this in mind: that without the Buddha's teachings, we wouldn't have this method. It's highly unlikely that any of us would have found it on our own or that we would have the courage to pursue it that far. So the method is available. We have the

example of people who've followed this method ahead of us and have guaranteed that, yes, it does give the promised results. A lot of the ground-clearing has been done for us.

So let's focus on our breath with a sense of gratitude that we've got this way and it's so accessible. Whatever difficulties it may involve, they're very minor compared to the difficulties faced by the Buddha or by the many people who had to rediscover the Buddha's teachings over time. We've got the central point, the breath, right here.

What does the Buddha tell us to do with it? In the beginning, he says, use your discernment to discern the difference between long and short breathing—something very simple. Ajaan Lee would add that you can discern other differences as well—long, short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Find the breath that's right for you, a rhythm and texture of breathing that the mind can settle down with. As the Buddha said, this method leads to states of strong concentration where there's a sense of well-being, even rapture. So, what kind of breathing would give rise to well-being? What kind of breath would give rise to rapture? Focus on finding that.

There's a lot that's not mentioned in the instructions. They simply give you ideas of what kinds of questions to ask yourself. So, how do you play with the breath without squeezing it too much, without forcing it too much, so that it does change into a breath that's really pleasurable? Part of this process depends on simply getting the mind very still and trying to be with the breath all the way in; all the way out, like a thread of silk that your finger follows without leaving it, just following, following, following it all the way in; following it all the way out. That smoothes it out.

The remaining steps, the Buddha says, are trainings. After you discern the differences in the breath, you train yourself to breathe in certain ways with certain purposes. You consciously manipulate things in the breath and the mind to get a sense of how cause and effect function within you. For instance, he says, you train yourself to breathe sensitive to the whole body. You try to spread your range of awareness from one spot so that it covers the entire body—and to sense the breathing process as a whole-body process. That fits in with the descriptions of right concentration where the Buddha says that you gain a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, and then you spread it through the body. You let it permeate through the body to the point where it saturates the body throughout.

The image he gives for the first jhana is that of a bathman. Back in those days, they didn't have bars of soap. Instead, they used a powdered soap that you would mix with water to turn it into a lump of dough. Then you'd rub it over your body. You had to knead the water into that lump of soap dough, just the way you knead the water into dough for baking bread. You try to make sure that the whole lump is moistened, but that no water drips outside. So there's an active element at this stage. Once there's a sense of ease and well-being, you work with it, you knead it through the body.

Again, having to learn how to work with ease and well-being so that it spreads through the body does require some skill. If you push it too hard or squeeze it too hard, it's not going to have a sense of ease or well-being anymore. You have to give it space to spread on its own. Open up any of the energy channels in the body that you sense seem to be tight. If you can't think of energy channels, think in terms of the muscles around the blood vessels, the muscles in the tiniest, tiniest parts of the body. Think of them all opening up, so that whatever energy is present can flow through them.

And then, the Buddha says, you breathe in such a way as to calm bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. I was reading a piece recently questioning the standard translation of bodily fabrication, asking, "Why would the Buddha introduce a technical term here?" Well, part of the reason we're doing breath meditation is because we're trying to develop both calm and insight. Insight requires seeing things in terms of fabrication. So the breath is something that fabricates your sense of the body. In fact, it's the primary thing that fabricates your sense of the body. Without it, you wouldn't sense the body at all. You'd be dead. The body would be dead. The fact that we breathe: That's the element through which we sense the other elements of the body, and can exert some control over them. It's because of the breath that we can even move the body.

So how do you calm it? Usually, the Buddha says, when you calm things down in the mind, you first try to develop a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness. In other words, you don't beat things down and make them still. It's like trying to get a dog to be still. You don't beat the dog to be still. You give it food, and when it's had food, it'll lie down and rest. So in the same way, you've got to feed the mind well with a sense of rapture. The Pali word for rapture, *piti*, can also mean a sense of refreshment. You refresh the mind; give it energy. So breathe in whatever way gives rise to energy.

Once the energy arises, think of it spreading through the body. Sometimes it'll spread on its own. Sometimes it'll do weird things to your sense of the body, distorting your sense of the dimensions of the body or the size of the body. You may feel that you're all head. Or that your body fills the room, or that it's very, very small. Just sit through those distortions. Don't get involved with them. They're signs that your awareness is trying to settle into an area that it's not all that familiar with. Then, after the rapture gives you energy and has done its job, it'll start to subside.

If you find that the rapture is oppressive, you can think of it flowing out the palms of your hands; flowing out the soles of your feet; flowing out your eyes. Or if it feels gross or gets tiresome, you can tune your mind in to a more refined level of sensitivity, like flying under the radar. And things will calm down, calm down.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that the total calming of bodily fabrication comes in the fourth *jhana*, when your breath stops. Again, you don't stop it by forcing it to stop. You feed the body, you fill the body with good breath energy. You try to connect all the different energy channels so that everything flows very smoothly, very quickly from one part of the body to the other, so if there's any need for breath energy in one part of the body, any excess energy in another part will flow right there.

In other words, you don't have to bring in energy from outside. The energy in the body is already enough. Just get it connected. Your need for in-and-out breathing gets calmer and calmer. The need grows less and less. And eventually you get there, to the point where the breathing stops on its own, but you're still very aware. That's the point where the body is very still. The mind is very still. Your awareness fills the body. And there you are: right concentration all the way through. Those are just the first four steps in the Buddha's sixteen-step plan, but they're enough to get you started. It's around these four steps that the other steps gather.

So that remark I mentioned the other night, where Stephen Colbert said, "What is this with Buddhism? You wrap yourself in a cloth, you go sit under a tree, and you breathe?" Well, yes. Those of us who do it realize that there's a lot to be learned and a lot to be gained by knowing how to engage with the way you breathe. We have a lot to be grateful for, that the Buddha discovered this way to awakening. Even if we don't go all the way to awakening in this lifetime, we can find a way to calm the mind down, to give it a sense of being at home in the body so that it can gain strength and a sense of inner nourishment; so that it can find some peace and can put down some of its burdens. Even if not forever, it can put them down at least temporarily so that it can straighten itself out.

At the same time, as you're working on this issue of bodily fabrication and calming it down, you learn a lot about how the mind relates to the body and how the body relates to the mind. That's the beginning of the insight that will take you beyond ordinary resting into a dimension that really is deathless. This fourth *jhana*, where the mind settles down to the point where the breath really does stop without being forced: It was from this fourth *jhana* that the Buddha was able to gain the insight that led to awakening.

So you're sitting right here where the Buddha was sitting. You begin to think in terms of fabrication. What are your intentions doing to shape the breath? How do those intentions shape your sense of the body? How does that happen? This is a good place to answer those questions so that you can benefit from the Buddha's teachings—his kindness in having shared these teachings—and from his courage in having gone out to find the teachings to begin with. As we keep doing this again and again and again, trying our best, that's how we show our gratitude for all that the Buddha and the noble disciples have done for us.