

Breath vs. Distraction

January 28, 2016

Just sitting here with nothing to do is very ordinary. It's so ordinary that the mind doesn't stay here very easily. It seems ordinary, but if you learn how to ask questions about it, you find that the more you ask questions, the stranger it gets. You've got this body, and you've got the mind that's aware. What are they doing here together? How do they relate to each other? A famous Zen master, Dogen, recommended asking questions like this: Is the body sitting in the mind, or is the mind sitting in the body? Which is the container for the other one? Or does there have to be a container? The reason for asking these questions is to start probing around into your assumptions about how you relate to the body, how you relate to your mind.

And you can move your awareness fully into the body itself, this breath that we're focusing on. What is the breath? Viewed from the outside, people say that it's the air coming in and out through the nose going into the lungs and then back out again, but how does it feel to you inside? Like that old Peanuts cartoon where Linus comes up to Lucy and says, "Feel my hands; they're cold," and she says, "Yes, they *are* cold, but how do you know that they're cold when you're inside them?"

The way you look to people outside is one thing, but the way you experience the body from the inside, the mind from the inside, is something else. And it's good to explore this area inside to see how it's not quite what you thought it might be. That gives you something to get interested in as you sit here.

Like the breath energy: We say that it flows through the body. But does it flow through the solid parts? In other words, are the solid parts there first, and then you have to pump the breath into them? Or does your awareness of the solid parts actually come to you through the breath? If it weren't for the breath, you wouldn't know they were there. So think of the breath energy being there first.

Thinking in this way can be very useful. If there's a pain in one part of the body, you may find yourself putting up a little wall of tension right around it, to contain it, there as you breathe in, and the breath energy seems to stop at the wall. As you do that, the circulation of the blood, the energies in the body, get all discombobulated. But if you that remember that the breath comes first, you reason that it shouldn't be the case that anything else in the body blocks the breath. Think of the breath as already there. And your awareness of the breath is there prior to your awareness of anything else.

So learn how to ask yourself a few strange questions about what it's like to just be sitting here breathing. That's one of your first defenses against distracting thoughts, because you're sitting here experimenting, finding things out, asking questions that you've never thought to ask before. Even if you *have* thought of asking them before, you can still explore. There's lots to explore in the relationship between the body and the mind and the breath. So when a distracting thought comes up it doesn't have the pull it used to have, because it's not as interesting, because you have something fascinating here to explore. If you're sitting here with nothing to do and nothing to think about and no questions about what's going on right now, then you start asking questions like, "Well, what about last week? And what about next week? And what about what I'm going to do when I leave here?" And all of a sudden that becomes a lot more interesting than the breath. But if you can tune into this level of interest with the breath, then you find that questions about last week and next week are really not that interesting after all. Here it is, your own relationship to your own body, and it's something you haven't really explored. Your own relationship to your own mind and your own breath: Here's your chance to get to know these things.

This way, if a distracting thought comes, it's easy to follow through with the Buddha's first instructions for dealing with distracting thoughts, which is to replace them with a more skillful thought—in this case coming back to the breath because there's still more to explore.

Now, if those thoughts have a pull that keeps pulling you back, that's a sign that you're attracted to them for some reason or another, which is why his second method of dealing with distracting thoughts is to try to see their drawbacks. And a lot of this has to do with karma. As the Buddha said, the things that your mind tends to go to bend the mind in their direction, and you find yourself acting under those influences. All too often, the mind's excuse is, "Well, nobody knows what I'm thinking, and it doesn't have any impact on the world outside, so I should be free to think anything I want." And you *are* free, but is that the best use of your freedom? If a thought comes up in the mind, ask yourself, "If I thought this thought for 24 hours, where would it lead me?" Remind yourself of how most of the distracting thoughts that come up in the mind, the ones that have a lot of pull, are things you've thought many times before. It's like an old movie. You know what Lauren Bacall is going to say. You know what Humphrey Bogart is going to say. So why do you keep watching it? Of course, in the case of a lot of these thoughts it's not Lauren Bacall, and it's not Humphrey Bogart. It's just a lot of bad acting. So what's the pull? What's the interest?

And it is important that you think about the consequences of your thinking: “Where is this thought going to lead you?” I’ve been reading a series of anecdotes about Ajaan Chah recently, things that haven’t been translated into English yet, and there’s one where a monk comes to him and complains that as he sits and meditates, thoughts of lust just take over his mind, and he doesn’t know what to do. So Ajaan Chah says, “That’s easy. When the next *wan phra* comes”—that’s the day when the lay people come to the monastery for the Lunar Sabbath—“when the next *wan phra* comes, we’ll have you get up in the sermon seat and have you describe to all the lay people out there all of your sexual fantasies from the past week.” The monk suddenly found it a lot easier to put those thoughts aside.

In other words, if you realize that your thoughts have consequences, you have to ask yourself, “Is this where I want to go?” Then it’s a lot easier to apply the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self to those thoughts to see that you really don’t want to go there. You want to step out. And this is what the breath is for. It gives you a place to step out of those thoughts.

Our problem is that when a thought comes, we tend to jump right into it. This is what the Buddha calls becoming. A thought world appears in your mind, and we go into it 100%. So we have to learn how to counteract that tendency, because sometimes you jump into a thought world and it’s pretty bad. And if you’re used to jumping in and wallowing in a thought world, then it’s harder to get out, but if you can have a sense of the breath as your safe place and the thoughts being less real than the breath, then it’s easier to pull out. It’s like being in a bad dream and realizing, “Hey, this is a dream; I don’t need to keep dreaming this.” All the concerns about being at the airport, and you can’t get to the plane, and your luggage isn’t there, and all these other things: You realize, “Hey, wait a minute, this is a dream,” and then the concerns about luggage and what-not, they’re just gone.

So learn to see your thoughts as that ephemeral and the issues in the thoughts as that unreal, because you’ve got bigger issues to deal with. You’ve got a mind that’s out of control. You’ve got to do something about it, and here’s your chance to step out.

Notice how the Buddha lists these ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. First you simply give yourself something better to think about. Then you look at the drawbacks of the thoughts that otherwise would pull you away, because when you’ve seen the drawbacks, even if you have trouble not getting interested in those things, it makes it a lot easier to do the next two steps, one of which is to just ignore the thoughts. In other words, they’re there, but you don’t have to go after them. The thoughts don’t destroy the breath. The breath is still here. So even

though all kinds of dialogues and shouting matches are going on in your head right now, you don't have to get involved. You've realized that these things have drawbacks, so why get involved with them? Even though there may be a tendency for the mind to keep spinning out in that direction, you don't have to go with it. The breath is here.

It's like a crazy person coming to talk to you. If you try to chase the crazy person away by arguing with him, the crazy person's got you. So you pretend that the crazy person's not there. You hear him, and you know what he's saying, and he's going to say all kinds of outrageous things to get to you, but you have to be firm in your resolve: You're not going to get involved. After a while, he'll go away.

Even if he doesn't, you've got another trick up your sleeve, which is that you breathe through the tension in the body that corresponds to the thought. The more you get sensitive to what the breath can do and how the breath relates to your thoughts, you'll begin to realize that for a thought to stay in the mind, there has to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It's your marker. So you can go through all the different parts of the body and ask yourself, "When this thought comes, what tenses up?" Then see what happens if you can locate that tension and release it. It may not necessarily be where you expect it to be. It's not always in the head. Sometimes it's in an arm. Sometimes it's in your knee. It can be almost anyplace.

If that technique doesn't work, then just grit your teeth and, as the Buddha said, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and resolve, "I am not going to think that thought." And of course the object of your meditation at that point is the thought, "I am not going to think that other thought," which may not be the blissful, calm state of dealing with the breath that you want, but if it's necessary, that's what you do. If you think of these different methods as tools, this is your sledgehammer.

A variation of this one is to have a meditation word that you just repeat very quickly in your mind, "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," rapid-fire, really fast. Think of all the cells in your body getting involved in the Buddho Buddho. Keep that up for a while until the desire to go after that thought dissolves away. Then you can go back to the breath.

What this all comes down to is that you make the breath as interesting as possible. Learn to develop an interest in what's going on. You've got this body. You've got this mind. It's really strange: How can this mind, this awareness, be related to this lump of flesh? What's the connection? And which part of the lump of flesh are you aware of first? It turns out that it's the breath. It's not the lump; it's the energy. Keep that perception in mind, and see how it helps you relate to

the body in a new way, and also how it helps you relate to your mind in a new way as well. See the drawbacks of thoughts that would pull you into greed, aversion, delusion, or sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. Have a strong sense that these things could take over your life if you're not careful, and the other techniques for dealing with distracting thoughts will come easily. You've shifted the balance of power inside so that you'll come out on top.