

An Inner Revolution

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When you look at dependent co-arising—the Buddha’s list of causes for suffering—one of the first things that strikes you is how many causes come prior to sensory contact. Sensory contact is where we tend to define what the present moment is: as soon as sound makes contact at the ear, that’s the present; sight makes contact with the eye, that’s the present. But other factors are already at work, shaping the present even before it happens, or even before you’re aware of it. It’s because they function in ignorance that they have a lot of power.

Some of these things include feelings and perceptions; what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation—the way you frame an issue in your mind and think about it; attention—the things you pay attention to and what framework you put around them; your intentions—what you want out of all this. All these factors are at work. So we need to learn how to bring some awareness to them in order to change the balance of power in the mind, so that the factors, instead of working toward suffering, will work in the other way. That’s how we bring more power to the mind—and also to the body.

Because one of those factors is the breath. How you breathe is going to have an impact on how you experience things. That’s the hidden member of the group that we’re trying to bring out to the fore as we meditate, trying to be very sensitive to how the breathing process feels in the body. By “breath,” here, we mean not only the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the movement of energy through the body, which can be felt on many levels. One of the more obvious levels is the flow of energy that allows the air to come in and go out. But as you sit with the body long enough, and you begin to get a sense of how the energy flows all over the body, you can see that it flows on many different levels.

Some of the currents are very fast; others are slow. Sometimes they’re working in harmony; sometimes they seem to be working at cross purposes. If they’re working at cross purposes and feeling uncomfortable, that’s going to have a bad impact on how you feel things in the body, what your moods are, how you think. So you try to make all this more comfortable. Develop a greater sense of ease in the breathing, a greater sense of spaciousness, a greater sense of the whole body as being nourished by the breath. That

right there begins to shift the balance of power, because when you can stay with the breath, it gives you a place to get out of your mind, out of your thought worlds that otherwise would have an overwhelming impact on shaping what you see and hear and smell and taste and touch. Instead of being totally immersed in a thought world, you can step back, away from it.

You can be here with the breath. And sometimes you notice that as a thought goes out, there really is a physical sensation going along with it, a sensation of something going out of the body. But if you can stay with the body, you can watch the thought as something separate as it goes out and falls away. That puts you in more of a position of power. You're now in a position where you can say Yes or No to your thoughts, instead of just going with whatever comes up, or going with whatever seems to fit with your perceptions of what you want to do. Because again, many of your perceptions are operating in the dark as well.

So as you're with the breath, you've got the comfortable feeling that comes with the breath, you've got the perceptions that holds you with the breath, you're talking to yourself about how the breath is going and you're adjusting it—trying to make the most of the sense of pleasure, getting the right balance so that your focus keeps the pleasure going and lets it spread.

Be careful not to drop the breath in order to go with the pleasure. If you do that, then you start wallowing around in a lot of vagueness. Try to be with the sensation of breathing, and let the pleasure do its work. Your intention is to stay here, and you're paying attention to the breath in such a way so as to make it more comfortable. All this takes all those factors that are prior to sensory contact and brings them into the light of day. You're engaging with them with knowledge, instead of in ignorance.

This changes the balance of power both in the body and the mind. In terms of the body, what usually drives us around are the pains in the body—either obvious physical pains or else the pain that comes on, say, when there's anger, or the pain that comes up when there's lust. Sometimes we don't think of those as pains. Sometimes we actually cultivate those sensations, because they serve a purpose that our perceptions have proposed and that our intentions go for. But when you get sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to realize that there's a lot of pain that goes with those emotions. If you can make large parts of the body more comfortable, more relaxed, the pain has less

of a driving power over you. You're not being forced around all the time. It doesn't hold a whip in its hand to make you do whatever it says.

You can sit with pain and not be pained by it, not be overcome by it. So that way, you're disempowering that aspect of the body, but you're empowering another aspect of the body. As you sit here and work with the breath energy, the body gets stronger. After all, when the Buddha gained awakening, he kept on teaching for 45 years; he wasn't disembodied. He had to use his body, to walk around northern India all the time. The distances he walked were quite large—all the way from Delhi to near Calcutta. Many times. And when he sat in meditation, it required strength of the body as well. He got that strength from the breath. So in the same way, when you work with the breath and you work with the perceptions around the breath, you can strengthen the body quite a bit. That way, you're empowering the body in a healthy way, and disempowering its unskillful or unhealthy influence over the mind.

Similarly in the mind: There are certain aspects you empower and others you disempower. You disempower the power of whatever thoughts come up. But you empower the mind in its ability to choose to think what it wants and not to think what it doesn't want. There's a sutta that talks about ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. And the conclusion of the sutta is not that you learn how not to think at all. The conclusion is that when you want to think a thought, you can think it; when you don't want to think a thought, you don't have to think it. And you get wiser in deciding what kinds of thoughts are worth wanting. In other words, you really are in control of your thought processes. This can mean that when you want to stay with the breath and make up your mind to stay with one thing—i.e. the breath—you'll stay there. And the thoughts get less and less involved.

In the first level of right concentration, there's a fair amount of thinking and evaluating, as you're working the breath energy—and the sense of pleasure that goes with the breath energy—through the different parts of the body, figuring out how to let it flow without pushing it too much. If you push it too much, it's no longer pleasant. You have to think of it as being like a syrup or a liquid that can seep through the body. All you have to do is open up all the little pores inside, not just the pores of the skin, but all pores everywhere in the body—all the channels in the body. Hold that perception in mind and you'll find that the power of that perception really will change the way you

experience the breath. So there's a fair amount of thinking as you're first getting involved here. But when that thinking has done its work, you can put it aside.

The thinking gets more refined until it becomes just one little thought, one little perception of "breath, breath, breath." And the breath itself gets more and more calm. At first it's quite strong as you get the bodily energy worked up a bit, energized a bit. But then you calm things down. It calms down even to the point where the breath stops. Not because you're forcing it to stop. It'll just stop on its own because all the breath channels in the body are so well connected that there's no need for the outside breath to be pulled in. The thinking is very, very minimal at this point—it's just a perception. So it's possible to get the mind to think as minimally as possible—but that's not the goal.

The goal is something beyond. But you use these different fabrications—as the Buddha calls them—these different intentions or acts of attention, to get everything in the right equilibrium. And then you ask questions. You have to think again. "Where is there still some stress here even in this concentration?" Or: "When the mind leaves concentration, when it picks up an object, where is the stress there?" These are the questions that are informed by the four noble truths. Where's the stress? What's causing it? What can I do to see it more clearly? What can I do to abandon the cause? Those are the questions that underlie the four noble truths, and those are the questions you apply both to the state of mind when it's in concentration, and to the state of the mind as it's leaving concentration, to get a better and better understanding of what's going on. It's through the understanding that you *really* begin to see these processes of fabrication as they're happening and as you learn how to do them in more and more subtle ways.

You can even get to the point where your sense of the body disappears. The body is here—you're not someplace else, you're not leaving your body. It's just that the sensations in the body that let you know, "This is the shape of the body, this is where the different parts of the body are," grow very still. And when they're still, they don't impinge on your attention. The breath energy is very still and very full throughout the body. The sense of the shape of the body begins to disappear. But that, too, is a fabricated state—it has to be held by a particular perception, a perception of infinite space, unbounded space, or unbounded awareness. Again, that's not the goal. And although it's a very nice place to rest, it's not the most energizing aspect of the meditation. The meditation has to be energized by being aware of the body. So you find yourself going

back and forth. But in the process, you get ever more subtle insights into what it means to fabricate your present experience.

A question that ultimately comes up is: “Is there an alternative where you don’t have to fabricate it at all?” That’s the question you pursue. And when you find the answer, that’s when things open up to something else entirely. There’s not even a sense of present moment at that point. It’s a different dimension. But as the Buddha said, it’s touched here in the body—it’s going to be experienced right where you’re experiencing the body right now.

So keep working right here, because right here is where things open up. That ultimate freedom is right near the spot where in the present moment you’re making your choices, or your intentions are deciding to do this or do that. You begin to realize, as you get more skillful in these various processes that you’re bringing up to the fore, that you do have a lot of freedom of choice here in the present moment. And right next to that freedom of choice, which is conditioned freedom, there is the ultimate freedom. It’s going to be found right here, right next to where you’re exercising your freedom of choice, as you master these skills, bringing all these processes of fabrication, intention, and attention into the light of day, changing the balance of power in the mind—so that instead of having unskillful things having power over your mind, things that are actually conducive to the path gain the upper hand.

So try to be clear about what’s getting disempowered and what’s getting empowered. Because the skillful sides of the mind are getting empowered, and the healthy energies in the the body get empowered. The parts that work against the skillful side get disempowered. And then even the skillful sides of the body and mind get overthrown when things open to the deathless. It’s like a velvet revolution—nobody gets killed, but things get radically changed.