

Wide-open Awareness

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There's a lot going on in our range of awareness. A famous philosopher once called it a big buzzing confusion: input through your ears, different sensations in your body, and whole worlds of thought running through your mind. And the trick of meditation is to take just one level of sensation and stick with it, hang on to it. It's like watching a buoy floating on the water. Even though the waves may go up and down, you keep your eyesight focused on the buoy. No matter what else is going on—the currents coming past, the waves, the wind, whatever—you keep your eyes focused just on that one spot, and you find that it's tranquilizing.

Even more so when you're meditating on the body, meditating on the breath. The breath is always coming in, going out. Even when it's not coming in and going out, there's a kind of buzzing energy throughout the whole body. That energy forms the potential for allowing the breath to come in and go out. It counts as breath energy as well. Even though it's still, it's a kind of energy. When we're meditating we want to keep our attention focused just on that one level, no matter what else is happening. The pattern of light from the candle flame shining on your eyelids, the sounds in the background, the sounds of the Dhamma talk: Just leave those in the background. You don't have to shut them off, but you don't want to shift your focus to them, either. Keep your focus right here on the breath. You can choose any spot in the body where it's easy to see that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.

And try to maintain that spot with a sense of relaxation. Don't tighten up the spot. Allow it to relax and then take that relaxed feeling as your standard. That's what you want to hold onto, or maybe better, that's what you want to keep tabs on. You don't want to hold on in the sense of grasping, because when you grasp it, that tightens it up again. Just keep tabs on it, keep your finger on it, watch as things come in, go out, but you stay right here.

When the mind goes wandering off to other things, ask it, "What are you looking for? Why are you going out looking to stir up trouble?" Because that's what the mind is, it's a troublemaker. It's always wanting to stick its nose into this, stick its nose into that, and of course there's a time and a place for that. Without that kind of curiosity, very little would have developed in the human race. But at the same time, very little trouble would have developed in the human race, too. As we meditate we're not training ourselves to be zombies or to be totally indifferent. We're learning that there's a time and a place to be

interested in things, and a time and a place when the mind has to rest. And right now is a time and a place to rest. If you want to be curious, be curious about the breath. Keep your curiosity focused in here. Don't let it go flashing out.

Normally when the mind goes out, it doesn't just look at things. It gets involved. A thought comes stirring into the mind, and we just don't leave it at that. We change it, we dress it up, we take it apart, we meddle with it. Our minds really are meddlesome. They can't leave good enough alone. So the attitude you've got to develop while you're here right now is that whatever else is happening outside right now is none of your concern. You don't have to get interested in it; you don't have to meddle with it at all. Just let it be. You stay with the breath. If you're going to meddle with anything, meddle with the breath. Change the rhythm of breathing to see what feels good. Change the depth of the breath, the pace, the rhythm of the breath. You can change the point that you're focusing on in the body. But as long as you stay on this level—the level of the energy you've got here in the body—you're fine.

When you can stay here, it's like having an anchor. It's like being grounded. When the mind goes off into its worlds—thinking about this person, that person, this situation, that situation—it often loses touch with present reality. It goes off into another world. Its feet come floating off the ground and you go drifting away. You're like a kite whose string is cut. Who knows where you'll go drifting to and where the wind will finally drop you. You can get tangled in a tree, tangled in electric wires, all sorts of places where you can end up getting tangled, which wasn't your intention to begin with. You were actually looking into something else, but it led step by step by step to someplace else that you hadn't expected. And it's all because you don't have your feet firmly planted on the ground. You don't have a grounding.

Without this grounding, all of your ideas about life, what's good, what's bad, get all mixed up. What's worthwhile, what's not. They all get confused because you don't have any grounding. Without any grounding, you don't have any clear reference point for north, south, east, or west. You're just blowing around. But when you stay with the breath, the mind has a foundation. You begin to notice that when certain kinds of thoughts come into the mind they cause a tensing up. They really do cause parts of the mind to shut off from other parts of the mind.

That allows for the mind's tendency to deceive itself. It's like when you were a kid and you got a magazine with pictures that you knew that you were not suppose to look at, and so you went off and hid under the covers so that nobody would see you. Of course anybody who was looking in the room seeing you sitting under the covers in the bed would realize that something was up. But the mind plays that game, not only with other people but also with itself. It starts thinking about certain things, knowing, "I really shouldn't be thinking about this

but I want to anyhow.” And so you erect barriers around that thought. What you remember about what you should and shouldn’t be doing gets blocked out. And of course that doesn’t really make your sense of right and wrong go away. It compartmentalizes your mind into different cutoff areas. And as a result, you end up living with a lot of ignorance.

So one of the important things about staying right here with the sensation of the breath energy in the body is that you can notice when those barriers appear in the mind. You know that the barriers are artificial, you know that they were intended, you know that they were deceitful. And after a while there comes a point where you say, “Okay, I’ve had enough of this. This is not really accomplishing anything at all, these little compartments in the mind.” And that way there’s less divisiveness in your own mind. When you start getting divisive in your own mind, it’s an easy next step to start getting divisive with other people. But when you learn not to put up these dividing walls, when everything in the mind has to be open and above board, you see that there are certain ways of thinking, certain ways of paying attention, that you are just ashamed to do. Greed comes, and you realize that if you’re going to go with the greed, you’ve got to erect barriers that are uncomfortable in the mind. Anger comes, and what so often happens with anger is that things get shut down in the mind so that only two courses seem open to you: Either you’re going to let it all out or else you’re going to suppress it and bottle it up. And of course it’s obvious that you want to let it all out if you can. You forget that there are lots of other alternatives to what you find yourself wanting to do and say. The same principle holds with all those other very unskillful and dishonest emotions we have in the mind: They can do their thing only when your sense of right and wrong gets barricaded off in the corner.

When you’re working with the breath, when you’re working with sense of the breathing throughout the whole body, it gets harder and harder to put up those barricades because you see yourself doing it. It gets harder to pretend that you’re not. And this way, when there’s more openness and more honesty in the mind, it’s a better-behaved mind. It causes you less trouble. You’re not sticking your nose into business that isn’t really your own. You’re not meddling with things that you don’t really want to meddle with. You find that the mind causes itself less and less trouble all the time— all because of this ability to be more open with yourself, more open internally.

And this is not just a mental openness; it’s a bodily openness, too. This is why we work with the breath, so that this openness seeps down into the body as well. All those subconscious roots that can give rise to these walls in the mind get saturated with the breath, saturated with knowledge, saturated with awareness. The conscious area of the mind gets larger and larger; the unconscious activities

get pushed off into smaller and smaller and smaller corners all the time, so that it's harder and harder for them to take over.

So when we're meditating, it's not as if we're clamping down and shutting things down. We simply keep tabs on this one level of awareness, this one level of energy here in the body, and we allow everything on this level to connect. Once it's connected, there are no areas where you can hide from yourself.

Now, some people find that scary. They're used to being in denial. But when you learn how to bring some compassion to the whole process of opening up to yourself, when you learn how to bring some understanding and maturity and equanimity to the process, you find that you're much better off working through these things than you were when you tried to keep them hidden. You've now got the tools where you can work through them. You don't have to be overpowered by these things. You're more and more in control.

This is not a control-freak kind of control. It's a control that comes from real knowledge. The reason we don't like control freaks is because they usually have one very narrow view of reality that they try to impose on everything else. But the kind of control that comes through the meditation is a control that comes from a 360-degree vision, all around. Everything gets put in its proper place, where it really does belong. You see more and more clearly what you really do have to think about and what you can let go.

But for the time being right now, let go of any thought that's not related to the breath. Just let it pass. You don't have to shove it around, you don't have to poke at it, you don't have to dress it up, you don't have to look into it, you don't have to be curious about it. Keep your curiosity focused on this one level of energy, the breath energy in the body. In the beginning there may not seem to be much to notice, just in and out, but there *is* more. Just start pursuing the whole question of tension and lack of tension, relaxation, throughout the whole body. Look at your posture. Notice how your breathing is affecting your posture, how your posture affects your breathing. Think of the breath coming in and out of the body in different parts. Think of your legs doing the breathing, think of your arms doing the breathing, your hands.

In other words, get in touch with the level of breath energy that's already there in the body but gets squeezed off when we don't want it to distract us from our thought worlds. We're now turning our priorities around, dropping the thought worlds and getting more and more interested in this energy field here in the body. Let it open up. When you let yourself open up to it, it opens up as well. And you find that it gives you a grounding, an undertone that permeates everything in your awareness, saturates the whole body with awareness, so that

whatever is going to come up in the mind comes up in an open field of awareness, rather than springing at you out of the dark.

When you learn to be open with yourself in this way, you find that there's nothing really threatening in there because you know where it all comes from. You've seen it arise; you see how it passes away. And you realize that no matter what, your range of awareness is larger than it is. Once you get used to this broadened field of awareness, you don't want to let it narrow down ever again. You realize that as soon as anger comes, things narrow down. When greed comes, when lust comes, when fear comes, everything gets narrowed down. It's like having lived in a large house and suddenly being squeezed in to a tiny, tiny cell.

And then you realize you don't have to squeeze yourself in there. It was your choice. When you realize that you've got the choice, you want to stay in the broadened awareness all the time.

So try to make this 360-degree awareness your basic level, your home, your grounding, the place from which you come. It's always there if you open up to it. Try to develop the skills you need to stay interested here and for the time being just drop your curiosity about everything else—the curiosity that wants to build a thought world out of this sensation, wants to associate that sound with some other sound. That kind of creativity can sound kind of nice—you can be very creative with your thoughts, you can create whole worlds—but this is not the time and place for that. After all, you've created innumerable worlds already, so many that you've become addicted to the process. Now see what it's like when you cut through that addiction; what's there when you don't create any worlds aside from the world of the breath in the present. Keep your curiosity here with the breath, and let the breath permeate the body. And then once this has become your home, and thoughts come in, they're coming in on *your* terms. They can't do anything to you that you don't want them to do. They can't trap you again, they can't deceive you against your will, because you see what lies all around them on every side.