

Solo Practice

June 3, 2005

Breath is coming in, going out all the time. The question is: Are you with it or not? Or are you going off someplace else? If you find yourself going off someplace else, just drop whatever it is. And the breath is right there: coming in, going out.

But you have to watch it again and again and again to get a sense of just right: what feels right coming in, what feels right going out, what feels right for this condition of your body right now. You have to look and you have to look again.

Because sometimes you find that you have cartoon ideas about the breath: how the breath has to come in, how it has to go out, what sensations you need for the breath to come in, what you need to do to pull it in if it's not coming in the way you want it to. Sometimes those cartoon ideas are helpful and sometimes they're not. So you have to learn how to question them. And this requires a little bit of imagination. Can you think of other ways that the breath might come in?

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee talks about, say, the breath energy coming in and out the back of the neck. Because that helps counteract any tendency we have to pull it in through the nose or pull it up into the brain. You have to reverse your patterns of pressure in order to get any kind of idea of the breath coming in from the back.

Or you can think of it coming in and out from the top of the head, in and out through your eyes, your ears—in any of what Ajaan Lee calls the resting spots of the breath: the base of the neck, the middle of the chest, just above the navel.

One of the terms for this process is called de-perception: questioning your perception of what's going on in the body and then trying other perceptions to see how they affect the breath.

Sometimes you find one perception that seems really comfortable and there's the tendency to tell yourself, "Ah, this must be it! This is *the* way to breathe." But then tomorrow you try it and it doesn't feel quite right.

So you try look again. Try other ways of testing your perceptions until ultimately you develop a repertoire. You get a more and more intuitive sense of what feels right for any particular state of the body.

Say you've got a headache. There are certain ways of breathing that are good, that help counteract the headache. And you also find there are ways of breathing that aggravate it. The principle applies to any other physical symptoms you may happen to be suffering from right now or enjoying right now.

There's no one single correct way to breathe. But there are certain questions

you want to ask that will hold you in good stead no matter what. Questions such as: How do things feel right now? Check them out. Look. Observe.

So much of the meditation is just that: learning how to question your old preconceived notions and then testing new notions. We sometimes think that we can go from our old preconceived notions straight to having no particular notions at all, but it doesn't work that way. You've got to try out different notions until you get a sense of the range of possibilities.

In the process of doing that, you develop more and more of a sense of balance with the breath, what's just right: how much pressure is too much pressure, how much is too little.

This is another aspect of the meditation: gaining a sense of balance.

When the Buddha talks about the factors of awakening, there are some he says that are energizing and there are some that are calming. And you have to get a sense of which ones are the proper ones to use at a particular time.

When the mind is sluggish, he says you want to start questioning things. There's first what he calls analysis of qualities: basically analyzing the qualities of the mind, seeing what's skillful right now, what's not skillful right now. And when you get a sense of what's skillful, then you work at augmenting it, bringing it into being and strengthening it until you get a sense of fullness. That, too, is energizing.

When the breath comes in, it doesn't squeeze any parts of the body. It feels like the blood is full in all the blood vessels throughout the body. And the breath is coming in, going out allowing that sense of fullness to remain and not squeezing the breath out, not dragging it in.

If, on the other hand, the mind feels too active, then you want to think more in terms of calming it down, getting the mind to stay just with one object and not think too much. Try to develop a sense of equanimity toward whatever comes up: good thoughts, bad thoughts, good breaths, bad breaths, whatever. Just be equanimous. Don't be too active in your thinking.

And how do you know which time to use the more active factors and which time to use the more calming ones? You've just got to learn through practice, through trial and error, until you begin to get a sense of just right.

Because so much of developing the quality of clear seeing in the mind lies in just this: being very observant, trying to get a sense of cause and effect. And developing this on your own.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that an important part of learning how to be a meditator is learning how to think like a thief. If you expect everything to be explained to you ahead of time, you're short-circuiting an important part of the learning process, which is learning how to watch, how to notice things on your

own, and then learning how to test what you've noticed to make sure that what you've noticed really is right.

If you throw the responsibility onto other people, you never develop your own powers of observation. The insights you gain are going to be just the ones you hear other people say, "Well, you should notice this, you should see that." Well, you can notice this and you can see that, you can make yourself notice and see these things, but it doesn't necessarily mean they're true. But if you notice that something works, it really does lead to a sense of calm, really does lead to a sense of balance: That's your test.

The Buddha's test for all of his teachings is a pragmatic test. In other words, does it work in leading to a sense of calm, to an ability to see things clearly? Whatever passes that pragmatic test, that's Dhamma. And your notion of what it means to pass, what it means to work: That's going to develop over time as your standards get higher and higher.

Ajaan Fuang used to use the word, "be observant, be observant" all the time. That was probably his most common instruction in meditation: "Watch. Look. Be observant. Use your powers of observation." See what cause connects to what effects, what action connects to what result in terms of pleasure or pain. Your powers of observation are what's going to lead to insight, the kind of insight that really does make a difference in your mind.

As Ajaan Lee once said, the principles of insight can be explained in just a couple of hours. But actually to see any of them in a genuine way may take a couple of years. The process of learning how to develop your powers of observation, and then again testing what you observed yesterday, testing it again today and then testing it again tomorrow so that your notion of what passes the test begins to develop: It's only in this way that you can guarantee that your insights really are genuine, that they really do make a difference.

So insight starts with something really simple: Is the breath comfortable? If it's not comfortable, try changing. How do you change? Well, you can try different ways. Sometimes simply thinking about "longer breath"—just a thought, "longer breath"—and the breath will go longer. "Shorter," the breath will go shorter. "Deeper," it'll go deeper. Other times you have to keep thinking, thinking, thinking before the movement of the breath energy in the body will change.

But this is how you get a more and more precise sense of what is making the difference. Sometimes you need patience. Sometimes you need just watching. Other times you need formulating and fabricating. But in any event, you begin to get a better and better sense of cause and effect in the present moment. And that's what connects to the four noble truths. You see what the mind does that creates

suffering, you see what it does that puts an end to that suffering. That's the basic pattern. Those are the basic questions.

They start from the simple process of learning to be observant of your breath. And then the focus moves inward so that you become more and more observant of your mind. You see what the mind does, you see it in action. And when you see that it's creating suffering and that the suffering is unnecessary, that there are other things you can do to react to that particular set of circumstances, then that particular cause of suffering gets dropped. You don't have to tell it to let go.

As long as you feel that you have to do things a particular way, that there's no other way of doing it, you're going to be stuck there. No matter how much you may tell yourself, "That's the cause of suffering. Craving causes suffering. Ignorance causes suffering": You can read it in the books and chant it, and yet deep down inside you feel, "Well, this is the way things have got to be." When you think that, you're not going to change. It's only when you're willing to question your assumptions and then see alternatives: That's when the mind's habits are going to change.

One way to view suffering is as a failure of the imagination, just like any addiction. And the way to improve your imagination is to start asking questions of things that you're absolutely sure must be true. And being willing to experiment.

It's like being a scientist. You have your hypotheses. But in this case a lot of your hypotheses are unstated, implicit. They're so ingrained you don't even realize that they're just that: hypotheses you haven't really tested. But when you start digging around, asking questions, turning things over: One good way of getting some insights is if you think you know something, ask yourself, "Well, what if the opposite were true? What would that mean?"

It's like turning over stones to see what's lying underneath the stone. After a while you get to see a lot of interesting things you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

Because after all, this whole process of the four noble truths, even though it sounds like something exotic you read in books, it's actually your own old question of, "What can I do to find true happiness?" It's all a very personal thing.

As the Buddha says, the Dhamma is *paccattam*, to be seen by yourself through your own efforts. Once you've taken care of this personal problem, you find all other problems are related to this one. And when you've taken care of this one, that's the end of all the problems that weigh down the mind.