

Looking Off to the Side

February 7, 2008

We're here because we aim at awakening, the end of suffering, a totally unconditioned happiness. So what are we doing looking at the breath? Why do we spend our time playing with the breath? Why aren't we going straight to the goal? Because the goal isn't something you go straight to. It requires strategies. One, because it's a huge goal. As with any large project, you have to break it down into smaller pieces, manageable pieces.

This is why when the Buddha was teaching breath meditation, he divided it up into sixteen steps. He divided up the states of jhana: first the four jhanas, then the four formlessnesses that you can develop based on the fourth jhana, as interim goals that you can actually focus on in making the mind more sensitive.

This is the important part of the practice: making the mind more sensitive to what's going on. All the things you need to know about awakening are right here. Even the unconditioned is something to be found by digging into the present. The problem is that we're not sensitive enough to detect it. So the practice is a process of developing our powers of sensitivity.

In the meantime, we also have these interim goals to keep up our sense of encouragement. If we had nothing but awakening to search for—one of those methods that are either awakening or nothing—what you end up doing is floundering around with no idea of whether you're making any progress at all. That's really bad in terms of keeping up your spirits and in making the practice manageable.

So those are two reasons right there and they work together. In setting interim goals the Buddha was not simply busying us or keeping us busy doing things when we should be doing something more important. The interim goals actually do add up to a path. That's the basic analogy of the practice. There are steps that lead you in the direction of where you want to go.

Even if it turns out that we're coming back to the spot where we were before, when we come back, we come in a different way. We've been exercised by the path. We've developed our powers of virtue, concentration, and discernment, which as we circle in on the present moment allow us to see more and more. One of the reasons we focus on the breath is because it's very close to that element of intention which is so important to understand. The breath is a bodily fabrication, which means that there's an intentional element in the breath. To get to know it, you don't pretend that you're going to sit here and watch the breath simply as it is

without your interfering with it. Actually, simply making up your mind to watch the breath that way interferes with it to some extent already; sometimes there are other types of intention that just go underground if you don't admit that they're there. So bring them up into the open air. Yes, we do intend to breathe, so let's intend to breathe skillfully. That's what makes this an exercise in making you more sensitive, because you see not only what kind of breathing feels better for the body but also exactly how much you can direct the breath and have positive results.

Sometimes you find yourself playing with the breath too much and you end up with a headache. You take that as a lesson: The breath can be manipulated only so much. There are other times when, no matter what you do with the breath, you can't find anything comfortable. Which is the point where you say, "Okay, I'm going to sit here and just watch for the time being, to see what elements of intention I haven't detected before."

So in playing with the breath, experimenting with the breath, evaluating the breath, you're developing the powers of sensitivity you need to see deeper and deeper into the mind, deeper and deeper into the processes of causality. This element of play is important. The Romantics, I think it was Schiller, said that it's in play that we develop our freedom within causality. This is where we get to explore the causal processes but with a sense of freedom. The more you know about causality through play, the easier it is to take apart the causal processes to dig down a little bit deeper, a little bit deeper.

It's important to realize that the ignorance we suffer from is not an all-or-nothing kind of thing. This is the problem with Zen. They have that idea that we're here to find Buddha nature, and it's one of those things you either know or you don't know. There are no incremental insights or incremental realizations of Buddha nature, which leaves them floundering around.

Whereas what the Buddha said was that the things we don't know are the four noble truths. Each of the truths has a duty, and as with any kind of activity, you can develop it more and more skillfully. You can get more skillful at comprehending suffering, more skillful in abandoning its cause, more skillful at developing the path and realizing the cessation of suffering. These are skills you can work on; they can develop incrementally until you finally get to the point where you've thoroughly mastered all of them. That's what awakening is.

So it is something you can approach in a stepwise fashion.

This means that, in focusing on the breath, we're not distracting ourselves from the real point of the meditation. It's by focusing here that you get more and more sensitive to what's here. At the same time, you're avoiding one of the big

quandaries the Buddha found when he was analyzing the causes of suffering, which is that if you desire a state of becoming, it's going to cause more suffering; if you desire a state of non-becoming—i.e., the destruction or nonexistence of what's here—that leads to further becoming as well.

The Buddha's way around that was not to pretend to transcend the duality. He said to look for a way of perceiving the present moment that these ideas of either existence or nonexistence don't even occur to the mind. They become irrelevant. He found that as you focus on the arising and passing away of events in the present moment, the mind comes to a state where the idea of existence or nonexistence just doesn't seem to make sense. Those categories just don't occur to the mind. They're irrelevant to what you see. You see things coming into being and the idea that there is no world out there at all doesn't make sense. But then you see them passing away, the idea that there is something out there doesn't occur to the mind, either.

So the Buddha has you look at things in a way that avoids that quandary. Just put aside those categories and you can get past them, get around them. This is why he said the path is not necessarily a straight path. You get to nibbana not by looking straight at nibbana, but by looking off a little bit to the side. You get around the quandary of craving for becoming and craving for not-becoming by looking at things in a way where the basic ideas of becoming and not-becoming—i.e., the idea of there being a self or there being no self or the whole idea of existence or nonexistence—just doesn't occur to the mind. You'd think that people would notice that and say, "Well, then the issue of the existence or nonexistence of self is an irrelevant issue, too"—which it is.

So what the Buddha does is to have you look off to the side a little bit, look at things in a different way, to learn about cause and effect by playing with the breath. That's how causality is discovered. That's how scientists discover cause and effect: They play around with things. In this way, because you have interim goals, you can think of things in terms of the sixteen steps of breath meditation or the four jhanas. Or if those steps are too big, just think of the fact that "I'm going to be with the breath more and more consistently. If the mind wanders off, I'm going to try to be quicker in coming back." These are tasks where you can begin to see that you're beginning to get results. That, in and of itself, helps keep you encouraged and on the path. At the same time, you're getting more sensitive and you're learning to look at things in a way that allows you to avoid the traps of becoming and not-becoming.

So this is why we're looking at the breath. It's like those stars you sometimes see in the twilight sky or the early morning sky. If you look straight at them, you

can't see them. If you look off a little bit to the side, there they are. They appear in your field of vision. We are looking for nibbana, but we're not looking straight at it. We're looking at the breath. But in looking at the breath, you eventually do get to see nibbana, to see the deathless. You realize for yourself that what the Buddha said was true: There really is a deathless element and it is the end of suffering. But the only way you get to see that is by looking at the breath coming in and out right now.