

Work & Play

June 9, 2011

Focus on the breath and try to adjust the breath so that it feels comfortable. Then allow that comfortable breath sensation to spread throughout the body so that you fill it with a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment. We call that both playing with the breath and working with the breath. It's work in the sense that it does require effort and we're doing it for the sake of accomplishing something. It's play in that we're exploring, experimenting, enjoying it. That's the best kind of work and the best kind of play—when you can put them together like that.

And it's important that you realize that as we're playing with the breath, it's not just playing around. We're trying to accomplish something important here—to develop concentration both as a good place to stay in the present moment and as a foundation for insight.

Some people wonder how you can play with the present moment and see things as they really are. Their question is based on the idea that the present moment is a given and you just have to be quiet enough to watch what's given. But that wasn't the Buddha's understanding of the present moment. He saw it as something you fabricate. And the fabrications don't come in just from the past. There's fabrication in the present moment that's shaping the present moment, and you can't see the process of fabrication in the present clearly until you learn how to do it skillfully.

This is why we work and play with the breath. We accomplish a lot of things this way. One is that it gives us something engaging to do in the present moment—to get us to stay here to begin with. If it's just in, out, in, out, in, out, the mind is just going to go out wandering away, out of sheer boredom. Then the concentration becomes an exercise in sheer will power: How long can you force the mind to stay here in spite of its impulses to wander away? But if you can see that by staying with the breath, working with the breath, playing with the breath, you're actually making the present moment a more interesting and more pleasant place to stay, then you're more likely to want to stay here.

You find it more engaging especially when there are aches and pains in different parts of the body and you learn how to use the breath energy to work through them. When you're tired, you can use the breath in a way that gives you more energy. If you're too tense, you can breathe in a way that's more relaxing. You see that you actually are accomplishing something here. And that makes it more interesting to stay in the present moment.

And the more interested you can get in the present moment, the more firmly you'll stay—not only right now, but also as a long-term project. That's a second benefit that comes from working with the breath: If you see that the meditation is accomplishing something and it's pleasant—it can be a refreshing and even rapturous place to stay—then it's a lot easier to stick with it over the long haul. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, it's like having an engine, with the sense

of rapture, fullness, and refreshment as the lubricant for the engine. If you run your engine without any lubricant, it's going to seize up and stop. The lubricant is what keeps it going.

But working and playing with the breath like this also gives you some good tools and a good foundation for gaining insight. To begin with, it gives you a good place to stay so you can actually watch suffering and stress. Our duty with regard to the suffering and stress is to comprehend it. If you feel threatened by it, you're not going to be able to stay with it long enough to comprehend it. There will always be the wish either to push it away or to run away from it. But if you have a good, solid, pleasant foundation in the body, you gain a sense of confidence that if the pain gets bad, you have a good place to go. Then you can stand by the pain and watch it more consistently, more continuously, with the desire to see it for what it is. That's what "comprehending" means. You actually see it to the point where you can develop dispassion toward it—to notice how it comes; how it goes; what the mind is doing that aggravates it; what the mind can do that doesn't aggravate it. This way, you can begin to comprehend what's going on.

And having the pleasure of a good state of concentration also gives you an alternative to sensual pleasure to go to when there's pain. People who don't have this alternative source of pleasure, this source of well-being, know only one alternative to pain, and that's sensual pleasure. And that's the kind of pleasure that keeps you blind.

The pleasure of concentration, the pleasure of jhana, though, is a different kind of pleasure. It's called the pleasure of form, which comes from fully inhabiting your body from within—having a sense of being in the body and finding it pleasant. This more refined sense of pleasure enables you not only to withstand pain and not go running off into sensual pleasure, but also to see more refined forms of stress that you wouldn't have seen otherwise. You actually see what's going on—what you're doing—that makes the level of stress in your mind go up and down, what makes the level of pain in the body go up and down. These are really subtle things, which you wouldn't see if the mind didn't have this level of concentration. And it wouldn't have that level of concentration without the sense of ease that you can develop by working and playing with the breath.

This puts the mind in a much better mood to admit its own involvement in the creation of stress, because this is something we usually don't like to see. When there's suffering and stress, there's a tendency to blame it on somebody else, especially when the mind has been doing things that deep down inside it knows it shouldn't be doing. It doesn't like to admit that to itself.

So one of the purposes of creating this sense of ease and well-being here is to put the mind in a much better mood so that it's more willing to say, "Oh yeah, that was my mistake. I am responsible for that." After all, that's one of the lessons of the four noble truths: that the suffering that weighs down the mind is not just the pain in the body. It's not the things that come at you. It's how you handle those things, based on your own ignorance, your own

attachment, your own clinging and craving—something we normally don't like to admit to ourselves.

It's like trying to talk to a person about his faults. If you catch him when he's in a foul mood, he won't want to listen. He'll be even more closed off to hearing what you have to say. But if you can catch him in a good mood, or put him in a good mood first—making sure he's well fed, well rested—you can then develop a sense of trust. It's a lot easier to talk to him about his faults, and he'll be more willing to do something about them.

It's the same with the mind. You soften up the mind by allowing it to feel a sense of well-being as you breathe in; well-being as you breathe out; a sense of well-being and ease, of refreshment that doesn't require a lot of investment aside from an investment of time. But with time, and as you get more skillful, it becomes more and more accessible.

And as you get more skilled at it, you start seeing this process of fabrication as it's happening. You get more sensitive to it. There's no way you're going to get beyond your attachment to fabrication unless you've learned how to master it. That's one of the basic principles of the practice. Or as Ajaan Lee says, you can't let go like a pauper. The pauper doesn't have anything, so he says, "Okay, I'll let go of my riches and my Cadillac" and all these other things that he doesn't even have. Well, he's still poor. Nothing's really accomplished that way.

But if you work at giving rise to this sense of well-being, you not only benefit from the ease in the present moment, but it does help give rise to insight. You start seeing how you create your present moment out of the raw materials that come from the past. This helps you become more sensitive to exactly what that difference between past and present kamma is: What in your present experience is coming from the past—intentions and choices you had and made in the past—and what's coming from your intentions right now? Where is your intention right now? Where is your present attachment?

As you develop the different forms of fabrication that go into meditation, into concentration—the bodily fabrication of the breath, the verbal fabrication of directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath, and then the mental fabrication of the feelings that arise from the breath and the perceptions that you use to stay with the breath—you really begin to see: What is your present intention? Where is it skillful? Where is it not? What can you do to make it more skillful? How can you pare down all the unskillful parts so that you can see the really subtle forms of intention that keep everything together?

As you get more skilled at this, you can get to a point of equilibrium where you realize that any intention at all, even the intention to stay in concentration, is going to perpetuate stress. And right there is an opening to freedom: right around this intention, this element of freedom you already have around your present intention—that you have to learn how to explore by exercising your freedom to choose the skillful choice. So the concentration brings us right

here to the point where things can open up and it does it in such a way that sensitizes us to fabrication so that we're prepared to recognize the unfabricated.

One of the paradoxes of the path is that the deathless is always there, but it takes time and practice for us to become sensitive enough to see it. And we have to learn how to look at the right spot so that we can realize it. And concentration does both. It makes us more sensitive and it brings us to the right spot—this element of fabrication, as you're fabricating concentration, fabricating the different levels of jhana. You can see the grosser levels of fabrication peel away as you go through the levels of jhana. That's what gets you to the unfabricated.

So it's not a matter of saying right up front, "Well, I'm not going to do anything. I'm just going to sit here and watch," because what that does is that it drives all the levels of fabrication underground. At the same time, you don't have the foundation you need in order to deal with stress and actually look at it for what it is. You haven't gained the subtlety you need in order to see the subtle levels of stress going on in the mind.

So it's important that we learn how to combine our work and play this way—working with the breath, getting a sense of how much is enough when you're working with it; and how much is enough when you're playing with it. We're not here to gain the perfect breath, or to be haunted with the idea that maybe there's a better way of breathing someplace else. If it's good enough to settle down with it, it's good enough.

And as you stick with what's good enough, your sensitivity and your taste in what's good enough are going to change. But you let them develop naturally. You're here to explore the present and the techniques for playing and working with the breath give you some tools to use as you explore. That way, the present breath becomes more and more the home where you can stay. And once you feel at home here, then you can really get to know it.

So think of this as both work and play. It really does accomplish something and it really is meant to be enjoyable as you do it. When you're sensitive to both of these elements, that's when you can go far.