

Conviction & Persistence

June 13, 2011

We're here to train the mind. But we focus on the breath.

It's by focusing the mind on the breath and keeping it there that we're developing some really good qualities in the mind: qualities of persistence, ardency, mindfulness, alertness.

It's by staying consistently with the breath in all the ups and downs of our lives that we learn some important things about the mind at the same time that we're developing those good qualities.

This is why it's not a matter of just watching the breath for a while and then wandering off and then coming back and wandering off again and thinking, "Well, it's okay that we're wandering off: We're learning to be equanimous and accepting."

The Buddha teaches us to be equanimous about some things and not equanimous about others. As he once said, the secret to his success as a meditator was, one, discontent with skillful qualities—in other words, not resting on his laurels, not saying, "Well, this is good enough." There's always the question, "Where is there still some stress? Where is there still something lacking? What can be done?"

The second secret was actually exerting, as he said, relentless effort. He just kept at it, kept at it, kept at it. That's what made all the difference in his practice.

These are lessons we may not like to hear, but they're an important part of the practice. We'd like to think that simply allowing things to happen and getting more chilled out would be a great way to gain awakening. But it doesn't work that way.

Sometimes you hear that there are two alternatives. Either you try hard and hard and hard and make yourself really neurotic and flustered in hopes that someday you'll squeeze awakening out of your breath. And the other is to realize that enlightenment is already there, the Unconditioned is already there, and your efforts are what's actually getting in the way. Learn how not to have any effort and that's it, you've solved the problem.

Neither of those approaches works. On the one hand, you can't create awakening. Brute effort is never going to get you there. And brute relaxation is never going to get you there, either.

Ajaan Lee has what I think is the best image to understand this issue. It's that there is freshwater in saltwater, but you're not going to get the freshwater out of

the saltwater simply by letting it sit there. You've got to distil it. It's the heat of your effort: That's the distillation.

And for each of us, this means two things. One is learning what kind of effort you're capable of, what kind of effort can you keep up—because the steadiness of your effort is important. We have a tendency to throw ourselves at the practice and then to throw back, and then throw ourselves in again and throw back again. We miss a lot that way. The consistency of our effort is what's going to allow us to see.

So we have to figure out what kind of effort we're capable of and then keep at that consistently.

The second point is that we have to develop the conviction that helps with this—and then the mindfulness and the concentration and the discernment that we need in order to keep that consistency going.

Conviction is what gives us the motivation that this is important: that, one, it is possible, and two, it really makes a difference. This is an essential part of gaining right view.

Think about when the Buddha was awakened. He learned a lot of things. But as he said, there was only a small handful of leaves that he actually gave us.

When we hear that right view is right view about stress, it's not simply a matter of understanding what stress is, but it's also understanding why it's such an important issue, why this was *the* focus of his teachings. At one point, the Buddha said that that's all he taught: stress or suffering—*dukkha* is the Pali word—and the end of stress. That was it. All the many teachings we find in the Canon are simply elaborations on those two topics.

So it's so good to reflect on why this is so important.

It comes down to the importance of our actions. Our actions really do make a difference. We can interpret the results of our actions in all kinds of ways, but the interpretation is not the issue. There's an element of stress prior to the interpretation. We're causing ourselves stress. And many times we don't even realize it. That's the issue.

Yesterday I was talking to a guy who told me that he doesn't cause himself any stress—it's just the rest of the world that's making him stressed out.

That's total blindness. The stress that's coming from outside can have an impact on the mind only because you let it have an impact. It's something you're doing: the way you think, the way you act, the way you speak. The stress is the raw material of the result. We can interpret it in all kinds of ways, but the Buddha wants us to look directly at it so that we can learn how to act in more skillful ways.

As we act in more skillful ways, we begin to understand what it means to act, what it means to make a choice. What is this element of freedom that we have in

the present moment, where we can choose to do one thing rather than another?

On the one hand, we hear that there's the impact of past karma. The past karma simply gives us a range of choices. And we do have freedom to make the choice. Oftentimes, we abdicate that freedom. We just simply act through the force of habit. But if we start focusing more and more on how to choose the most skillful alternative, then the more we exercise our freedom in the direction of being skillful, the more we understand what that freedom is—and the more we see into that freedom. Right there is where we find the ultimate freedom.

So we test our actions, we test this quality of skilfulness, by the amount of harm we're doing on various levels.

First it starts out with the harm that comes when you break the precepts. Then it means noticing the stress that comes with a particular way of acting or thinking or even focusing your mind.

Then it turns into the word "disturbance." What kind of disturbance is there still in your level of concentration? Realize that it doesn't have to be there. You're doing something that's causing it. Again, the reflection is always back at, "What are you doing? What are you doing?"

This is why we look for inconstancy. Often, things seem to be very steady, and we don't see that we're doing anything. It just seems to be the way they are. But then there'll be a little blip, a little wavering either in the level of stress or pain or in the level of pleasure. That wavering is what notifies us: Okay, there's something you've done, something changed. What was it?

Keep pursuing this to ever more refined levels. When you do, ultimately you arrive at true freedom.

This is why the Buddha focuses on this issue, why it's so important. It's important that we look at everything in our lives in terms of the truths that he pointed out around suffering.

They're not just truths about things. They're actually a framework for looking at our lives. Where's the stress? What's causing it? What can be done to put an end to it? And it is possible to put an end to it.

You look at your experience to see which of the truths is relevant. Each of them carries a different duty: That's why the Buddha made these distinctions. If you see there's stress, try to comprehend it so that when you see the cause—i.e., what you're doing that's causing it—you can abandon that.

Now, to comprehend it, you have to develop certain qualities of mind. This is why we're sitting here practicing concentration, trying to make the mind as steady and consistent as possible. If you're going to see stress and really understand it, you have to watch it continually. That requires firmness of mind, the ability not to feel

threatened by it, not to be in a great hurry to get through the problem but to watch it patiently so that you can understand: “Oh, this is what I’m doing. This is where I’m adding unnecessary stress to the situation.” Or, “Here’s a choice I didn’t see.” Or, “Here’s a choice that I’ve been making and I didn’t even realize I was making it.”

These are the things you want to look for, and they require the steadiness we’re trying to develop here as we stay with the breath. That, together with a sense of well-being that allows us to watch the stress and not feel overwhelmed or threatened by it.

This is why we’re working with the breath right here, to develop these qualities of mind that can allow us to watch the stress and really understand it so that we can go beyond it.

So we work on these things; we develop them. It’s not the case that when concentration arises you say, “Okay, there’s concentration. I’ve seen it, that’s that. What’s next?” You stick with it. Once it’s there, you try to develop it, nurture it, see how far you can take it.

Again, it requires that quality of consistency: the ability to stick with it over time, regardless of whatever else comes up in the mind. Only when you can see past these other things that come up in the mind can you see *through* them.

There are the obstacles the mind will throw up: interested in that, interested in this, and bored with the breath. Well, if you’re bored with it, it’s because you’re not paying careful attention. Come back and look at it more carefully.

Or if you’re feeling discouraged, you have to keep reminding yourself that this is a long-term project. Everybody who’s been on this path has gone through periods of discouragement, periods when it didn’t look like they were going to get anywhere at all. Yet they were able to get past those periods and get to something that was really solid.

This is why conviction is so important. It contains within it the seeds for all the other strengths you’re going to need on the path. It keeps you going, keeps you going, keeps you going when all the other voices in your mind are saying, “Stop,” or, “It’s impossible,” or, “Forget about it.”

You can’t really forget about it. Once you’ve started on the path, you realize, that there’s work that has to be done in the mind. If you just drop it, it simply means you’re delaying the task to some other time.

And it’s not that as you get older it gets easier. Or that you have more strength to do it. If you find yourself saying, “Wait till I’m wiser when I get older, then I’ll come back,” tell yourself, “Wait a minute. Wisdom doesn’t belong only to old people.” If you don’t want to be wise now, it’s not going to be easier as you get

older.

You may say, “Well, let me suffer more before I come back.” Well, No. Why? Why would you want to suffer more?”

The mind plays all kinds of tricks on itself to pull itself off the path.

A better way of seeing it is as different members of the mind’s committee. Some of them are with the path and others would like to go off and do something else.

The wisest thing is to realize, “Okay, this is ultimately what the solution is going to be, so why not stick with it *now*? Why not work on it *now*? Why delay matters?” This is where you’re going to have to end up anyhow: working on the problems of the mind, on why the mind creates suffering even though it wants to create happiness.

Even though many sections may rebel, you say, “Well, I don’t have to give into them. I’ve given into them many, many times in the past. Let’s try something new.” And even though the breath may seem old, still it opens up new possibilities as you stick with it continually. The continuity is what opens up things that are new. Give that a try and see where it takes you.

This is basically what conviction is. You know the content of wisdom, you’ve heard what the Buddha’s had to say, yet the mind isn’t totally with the program, but there’s a part that says, “Well, let’s give it a try.” Try to strengthen that part as much as you can.

That’s what will see you through.