

Everything Gathers Around the Breath

November 10, 2011

There's a phrase in Thai, *lak wichaa*, which means the basic principle of a skill you're trying to master, or the principal thing you're trying to master in a skill. And in our practice here, our *lak wichaa* is the breath.

You can relate every issue in the practice to the breath. Ajaan Lee has a lot of Dhamma talks where he talks about how the different Wings to Awakening relate to the breath in one way or another. You look in the 16 steps of breath meditation, and you get training in focusing on the body by focusing on the breath. You get training in learning how to comprehend feelings by focusing on the breath. You get training in how to bring some order into your mind by focusing on the breath, and you learn about the dhammas that can lead to release by focusing on the breath. So it's important that we never forget this, that this is where the focus can always go, whatever you're doing in your practice.

The other day I was talking to a monk from another monastery who was complaining that his practice had lost focus. He couldn't figure whether to be doing tranquility practice or insight practice, and just didn't know what to do or where to go. And the answer, of course, is, "Well, stick with your breath." If the mind needs to settle down and gain some tranquility, use the breath. If you're going to gain insight, one of the best places to gain insight is when you're focused on the breath—because the breath makes sure that you're in the present moment. There's no past breath you can watch and no future breath you can watch. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. And it's one of the things in your awareness that's closest to your mind.

As you learn to come to the breath repeatedly, you begin to gain a sense of which direction the mind is tending. Does it need more calming down? Does it need more insight? Does it need to be gladdened, or does it need to be settled down and made more steady? Is it burdened with something that it needs to be released from? You can see these things as you focus on the breath.

So try to keep your attention focused here. Everything else you need to know, and everything else you need to deal with, is going to gather around. It's like putting a salt lick in the middle of a forest. You're going to get all the animals eventually. They're all going to come there because they all need the salt. So you can set up your camera and get pictures of whatever you want.

In the same way with the breath, whatever aspect of the practice needs to get some extra work, you're going to see it when you focus on the breath. So try to get

a sense of what healthy breathing feels like. Right there, you're going to gain some practice both in dealing with the breath and in dealing with feelings and the mind.

There's a passage in one of the texts where the Buddha talks about how you can work on the factors for awakening by dealing with any one of the frames of reference or the establishings for mindfulness. And if you look at the different tetrads when the Buddha sets out his 16 steps for breath meditation, you see that there's a lot of overlap. It's not the case that you do just one step without actually engaging some of the other steps as well. Step number three is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, or the whole body as you breathe out. Step number four is calming bodily fabrications. In other words, you're calming the effect that the breath has on the body. Well, what is that effect? That effect goes through feeling.

That takes you right into the next tetrad. You're breathing in ways that give rise to rapture. If the body needs the nourishment that comes from rapture, you apply that. When you've had enough of that, you focus more on simple pleasure. The pleasure can get more and more refined until it's just a sense of equanimity—balance, equilibrium—and as you do that, you're working with the mind. You're gladdening the mind. Working with pleasure and equanimity, you're making it more steady. And at the same time, you're releasing it from, say, the heaviness of rapture. Or even before the rapture, you're releasing it from the heaviness of feeling ill at ease and ill nourished. Then when things settle down, there's less need for any directed thought and evaluation, so you can release it from that. That puts you in the third and fourth tetrads.

So these tetrads overlap. They're different ways of looking at what's going on in the process of learning to be mindful and then trying to deal skillfully with what you're aware of, as you're mindful and alert. Those are the first steps in the factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence. In other words, you remember to stay on topic and you analyze what's going on, what's working and what's not working. You make an effort to do what's skillful. That effort then gives rise to rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. As you deal with the breath in these ways, you're developing the factors for awakening at the same time you're developing the different frames of reference or establishings of mindfulness. So it's all right here. It's simply a matter of which aspect of the breath, or which aspect of what you're doing, seems most prominent or needs most attention.

Even when you get into the last tetrad: It starts with inconstancy. Now, many people understand inconstancy or the contemplation of inconstancy simply as

trying to step back and not do anything at all: just see things arising and passing away. But you don't really make full use of the perception of inconstancy until you learn to see connections. After all, the Dhamma eye is not simply seeing that whatever arises, passes away. The actual insight is: Whatever is subject to origination is also subject to cessation. Now "origination" here means cause. There is a factor that arises with it when it arises and then passes away together with it. So when you're looking for inconstancy, it's not just watching ups and downs, but also watching what goes up with the ups and what goes down with the downs. And the only way you're going to understand causal connections is to experiment.

So you're working with the breath in terms of spreading it through the various parts of the body: breathing in ways that give rise to a sense of fullness or refreshment, rapture, ease; trying to breathe in ways that feel gladdening when the mind is low or lacking energy, ways that make you feel steadier when the mind is overactive, or ways of breathing that release you from holding onto particular pain patterns in the body. As you experiment with all these things, you're beginning to see cause and effect.

It's the same as running any scientific experiment. You've got to adjust the factors that you think may be causes to see if they really do have an impact on the effects. It's the only way you're going to be able to connect cause A with effect A or cause B with effect B. Otherwise, you're like the Thai farmers who walk into a town, and they see a neon light for the first time in their lives. Then one of them goes up, he blows on it, and the neon light happens to go out at the same time he blows on it. So he's convinced that he blew it out.

You can see things coming and going, and they seem to come together and go together, but you can't really be sure until you've experimented. Only when you see the connections between things can you realize how whatever sense of ease or sense of well-being you've managed with the breath, no matter how great it may be, can only go so far.

This is where the contemplation of inconstancy leads to contemplation of stress and the contemplation of not-self. That's what leads to dispassion. When you realize the extent to which you've been shaping these experiences and feeding off them, trying to get some nourishment out of them, and the nourishment isn't all that you want, then you incline your mind to the deathless. And when you've finally had enough of this kind of food, that's when you stop creating it. That leads to cessation and then, finally, relinquishment of everything, including the path. Those are the final steps in the breath meditation.

It's only when you see the connections that you're able to notice what it was that you were doing to keep this process going. Only then can you stop it and

let it go. You get out of the mind-state that says you have to choose either this or that, focus here or focus there, move this way into the future or move that way into the future, feed on this or feed on that. You realize you don't have to feed anymore. You don't have to make those choices anymore. That's when everything begins to unravel.

So that's where we're going: to that unraveling. But there's a part of us that steps back from it. Still, we go forward on the conviction that, as the Buddha said, this is the highest happiness. Most of us aren't willing to go there. None of us are willing to go there really, unless we see the limitations of where we've been feeding so far. But that doesn't mean you try to short-circuit the process by not following the steps and going straight to letting go. You've got to get involved. You've got to work with things to understand the connections. If you don't understand the connections, you can't let go of the right thing.

I was talking to somebody a few days ago who was saying, "Well, I thought that the way of dealing with emotions was just to step back from them. Watch them arise and pass away. And that was it." But that's not it. They're going to come again and again and again. And we're not here simply to learn the sense of spaciousness that's okay with these things coming again and again. We want to dig deeper to find out what's causing them so they don't have to come again.

This is why we're working and playing with the breath. We look at it from the point of view of the body, the point of view of the feelings, the point of view of the mind, and of the qualities of the mind that are involved. The connections that are arising and passing away are events in the mind and the body. All these things are happening here, and they're all things that you can learn how to observe, how to master and really understand as you work with the breath.

This is why this is our *lak wichaa*, why it's the basis of our skill, the thing that we're trying most to learn how to master: because when you really comprehend it, it takes you really far.