

Interested in the Breath

April 13, 2013

Try to find a comfortable position to sit in, the back comfortably straight, facing ahead. Put your hands in your lap close to the body, to help you maintain a straight posture. That's getting the body in position.

Next is getting the mind in position. Focus on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and see where the breath is most obvious. It might be in the movement of different parts of the body or the air coming in and out of the nostrils. Anywhere in the body where you notice the breath most clearly, focus there. As you focus, don't clamp down on things. Allow the breath to have its freedom. If deep breathing doesn't feel comfortable, you can change. Either pose the question in your mind, "What kind of breathing would feel best right now?" and see how the body responds, or you can consciously change the way you breathe. Make it shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter; in long, out short; or in short, out long. There are lots of ways you can experiment.

Why do you experiment? So that you can get interested in the breath. The only way you're going to stay with the breath is if you find it interesting. If you're simply pumping it in—just trying to clamp down on the mind to keep it with in-out, in-out, in-out—it's going to run away. It's not going to stay.

But you can remind yourself that there are lots of good reasons to be interested in the breath. The first one, of course, is that when you're with the breath, you're in the present moment, and the only place you're going to be able to observe your mind is in the present moment. So being with the breath ensures that you're in the right spot. You're not slipping off into thoughts of the past or the future.

That's one of the advantages in training the mind with the breath, but there are other advantages as well. In terms of your body, if you can get the breath to be comfortable, you get more and more sensitive to the flow of the breath energy in different parts of the body, and it's good for your health. Even if the mind doesn't really settle down solidly in the present moment, the fact that you're working with your breath means you're going to gain some benefits in terms of diseases in the body that would be caused by poor circulation. You actually can treat them by working with the breath energy in those parts of the body. When you're tired, you can breathe in a way that gives you more energy. When you're feeling tense, you can breathe in a way that's relaxing. In other words, you can use the breath as a medicine for the body and for the mind.

So learn to take an interest in the breath. Start asking yourself questions about it. The mind's going to be talking to itself anyhow as you meditate, especially in the beginning. So teach it how to talk about the breath in a way that keeps you interested, keeps you here exploring—because that's what the Dhamma is. We're exploring right *here*, in the mind and the body in the present moment, to see what's going on. The Dhamma is not over there in the books. Those are just signs pointing to the Dhamma, and they keep telling you, "Look here, look inside." So you've got the time and you're right here. This is where the real Dhamma is.

What's Dhamma? It's the truth about what's going on in the mind and particularly, the truth about how the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself. This should be something you find very interesting because we all want happiness. Everything we do has someplace in it a intention or a desire for happiness. Yet if you look at the results of a lot of our actions—or our words or our thoughts—they weigh us down with suffering. Why is that? Where is the ignorance that causes us to act and speak and think in ways that actually weigh us down? What's going on here?

The Buddha teaches the words for what's going on: ignorance and craving. But what are those things actually like, and how can you watch them? Can you catch them in the act? Can you replace the ignorance with knowledge and awareness? Can you replace the craving with a state of mind that doesn't cause suffering? Those are important questions. They're questions that are related to your true happiness.

So the breath right here that you're watching, coming in and going out: It's related to the big issues in life. By staying with the breath, you get the mind in the present moment. You get it sensitive to all the relationships between the body and mind. Then as you develop an awareness of the breath energy in different parts of the body, you arrive at an all-around awareness that enables you to see what's going on in the mind—in the corners of the mind that you keep hidden from yourself. This is one of the ways in which we overcome ignorance: by expanding our range of awareness, making it all-around. Then we can see the movements of ignorance and the movements of craving as they create stress and suffering in the mind—right here, right now.

When we see it happening right here, right now, we can counteract those things; we can actually solve the problem, which is *the* big problem in life, that regardless of what's happening outside, the mind can still create a lot of stress and suffering for itself inside. Even when conditions outside are relatively good and things are going well, we can spoil it. But if you develop more awareness, you can

catch yourself in the act. That puts you in a position where you can do something about it.

It's through working with the breath, trying to train the mind in concentration, that we actually develop discernment as to what's going on. There's the discernment that comes from reading books, and there's the discernment that comes from thinking things through. Those are helpful. They give us a sense of the general direction of the practice; they give us a sense of the possibilities in trying to understand the mind. But it's in actually doing the practice here that we gain discernment.

How do you gain discernment watching the breath? There are two big issues that are related to gaining discernment with any skill, and they apply particularly to gaining discernment into the mind. Practicing with the breath is like practicing the piano. You have to be observant about what you're doing when you're playing the scales. How do you play the scales in a way that's even, that's most efficient, that uses the least energy, and gets the best results? That's something you want to watch. Then you watch yourself practicing. How many hours of practice? What kind of practice gets the best results?

There's an element of discernment there that we can talk about. The teacher can give you some ideas of what to think about, where to look. But it also requires your own powers of observation. When are you putting unnecessary effort in? When are you putting *not enough* effort in? Where are you adding unnecessary stress to what you're doing? Look for that, because once you see, one, that it's stressful and, two, that what you're doing is unnecessary, you can drop it.

It's the same with the different movements in the mind that cause suffering. You want to see them in action and to see where what you're doing is unnecessary. And it does create a weight on the mind. How can you see that? Well, you have to be very careful to watch for the level of stress in the mind as it goes up, as it goes down. When it goes up, what did you just do? When it goes down, what did you just do?

That right there is an important principle in discernment: seeing where you're adding unnecessary stress to a situation—even when you're working with the breath. In the beginning, you have to be very careful. There will be a sense of clamping down on things just to make sure your mind doesn't go wandering away. But if you stay clamped down for too long, it's going to create an imbalance in the body. Things aren't going to feel right. You're going to feel tied up, tied down, confined, and when the mind gets its chance, it's going to run away.

So, what can you do to maintain your focus yet pull back a little on the pressure? As I said earlier, you want this point of focus to be steady but open.

How do you do that? When you see yourself clamping down too much and then realize, “Okay, I can stay here, but without the clamping down,” that’s an important lesson in developing concentration. You’re also developing your discernment at the same time.

That’s one of the ways in which watching the breath develops discernment into the movements of the mind. The other is the sense of balance that you’ve got to develop—a sense of what’s just right, what’s too much, what’s too little. You’ve probably heard the story of the monk who’d been practicing really hard, doing walking meditation to the point where his feet bled. He got discouraged and was thinking about disrobing. The Buddha suddenly appeared in front of him. “So you’re thinking about disrobing?” The monk had to admit that, yes, that was the case. So the Buddha reminded the monk of the time when the monk was a layperson and played the lute. He said, “When the strings of the lute were too tight, did it sound good?” “No.” “When they were too loose, did it sound good?” “No.” “So you have to tune the lute just right.”

In other words, figure out how much energy you have right now. Start with that. Give the kind of energy that you can sustain, and then adjust the rest of your practice to that, in the same way that you tune one string on the lute and then, once that’s tuned properly, you tune the remaining strings to that first string.

Finding the point of “just right” requires discernment. When you’re focusing on the breath, how much pressure is just right? How much is too much? How much is too little? If it’s too little, the mind just slips off, slips off. If it’s too much, the breath is going to feel confined. How do you know what’s just right? There’s no meter to measure it. You have to notice: When you focus with this much pressure, what are the results down the line? You can focus with this much pressure for 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes. What happens? If it’s not just right—if the mind is slipping away—you’ve got to put more pressure on. If you’re feeling confined, back up a little bit.

Finding a point of moderation requires a *lot* of discernment. You can run to extremes. That’s easy. You say, “I’m just going to sit here until I get awakened. I’m not going to move. I’m not going to move,” and just sit there, sit there, sit there, and do nothing else. If you just tell yourself to do one thing, it doesn’t require much discernment, just a lot of persistence. But if you’re looking for balance, for “just right,” you have to weigh many things. This develops your discernment because again, there’s no meter to tell you how much is just right.

This applies to all kinds of things in the practice. How much should you eat? What’s too much? What’s too little? How much sleep should you get? What’s too

much? What's too little? How do you read the signs? By trying things out and learning how to read the results.

It's the same when you're staying with the breath, trying to figure out how to do it well without causing any unnecessary stress for yourself and finding the point of "just right." That's how this simple technique can give rise to some very important powers of discernment as you get more and more attuned to the movements of the mind, to the relationship between the breath and the mind.

This sensitivity in the present moment is what we're working for, because once you're sensitive, you begin to see, "Okay, that's a movement of the mind that's causing stress. Here's an alternative way of moving the mind or keeping the mind still that's *not* going to cause stress." These are things that you can experience only from within, and you can gain the sensitivity only for yourself.

This is why we take an interest in the breath, because it gives rise to very important, very useful insights into the workings of our own mind.