

A Thread into Awareness

August 14, 2013

We focus on the breath to catch the mind. You can't grab hold of the mind directly; you've got to give it something you can get interested in. And so we work with the breath to notice what way of breathing feels good, what way of breathing doesn't feel so good right now. And sometimes it's not a matter of feeling good right now, but what kind of breathing is going to be good for you?

Back when I had migraines, I found that a really effective way of breathing was to breathe in as deeply as possible - expand the abdomen as much as possible. It didn't feel pleasant, but it had a good effect on the body.

So it's not just immediate comfort that we're looking for as we stay with the breath. You want to see what the results are over time. In Pali, this quality of looking intently is called *citta*. It's the word for "mind" but it also means "intentness" or "interest." You find something that really engages you, and that helps you to stay in the present moment. It gathers all of your awareness right here.

Eventually, you'll want to turn around and look at the awareness itself and start peeling away the different layers within it. But the form of the body is the first object of your attention, because when you're with the breath, you're with the form of the body right now; you *know* you're in the present moment. Otherwise, if you focus on a perception, you suddenly find it drifting away and turning into something else.

So you stay with the perception of the breath, and you stay with the sensation of the breath. Try to keep the two of them nailed together. And work with the breath to whatever extent is needed to get the mind to settle down, to feel at ease. Then try to maintain that as you go through the day. You may not have perfect breathing all the time, but we're not here to be perfect breathers. We're here to work with the breath to the extent that it helps us settle down and get to know the mind.

As you go through the day, it may be hard to notice when the breath is coming in and going out at the same time you're doing another chore. But you can have a general sense of how the breath energy feels in the body – whether it feels generally tight or generally at ease. If it feels like it's tightening up some place, what can you do to zap the tightness as it's beginning to spread or before it begins to spread? You'll come to know that you have certain spots in the body where the tightness comes first. If you give extra attention to those spots – make sure that not the slightest little bit of tension there is going to go unnoticed – you can nip a lot of things in the bud. Then again, the effect on the mind is going to be a little indirect but it's there – definitely. You can go through the day with a general sense of ease, a general sense of openness, spaciousness. It's a lot easier for the mind to stay here and enjoy staying here.

As for whatever extra energy comes as you master this, learn how to use it well because again, we're here for the sake of the mind. All too often, with the struggle to get the mind to settle down, sometimes you feel too tired to concentrate. "If only I had more energy," you say. Well, often when you get more energy, you find your attention scattered all over the place. Learn how to reinvest the energy. Try to be on top of the situation. As soon as you see the mind begin to move in the wrong direction, zap it. And it's going to complain. But you can't listen to its complaints except to the extent to which you're trying to listen for its reasons: why that part of the mind feels justified in saying, "Okay, now we've done some meditation, we've invested enough in the Dhamma. Let's invest in something else." You can tell it, "As long as you're not yet an arahant, you haven't invested enough in the mind."

You want to be very picky about where you're going to find your pleasure, how honest you want to be about the pleasure you're looking for, and how stable you want that pleasure to be. As the Buddha says, one of the ways of keeping yourself on the path is to remind yourself: You started on this good path, and you don't want to settle for second best. You don't want to go back to your old ways

because if you do, you don't really love yourself. This is where using a sense of self is an important tool on the path.

So one of the ways of reinvesting that energy as you get extra energy in the practice is to turn around and try to see how much *more* concentrated you can get. When they talk about the higher levels of concentration where the breath grows still, or your sense of the body begins to dissolve: If you want to get *to* the mind, this is what you have to go through.

Get the breath comfortable enough so that you can stay with it continually, so you don't have to do a lot of adjusting. You want to just be there with the sensation of breathing. It may feel that you're not being very smart, or that your mind isn't totally mentally engaged, but tell it, "Okay, you don't need to be smart or engaged. Just stay right here. You've heard yourself chatter enough in this lifetime." So you just listen to it say, "Breath, breath, breath." And that's enough.

If a sense of fullness comes up in the body, allow it to be there. You don't focus on the fullness as the object. It's part of the energy that's released as you're breathing and the mind is settled in. You focus on the breath because the act of focusing on the breath is what causes that sense of fullness to be there. Don't get the cause and the effect mixed up. Eventually, that fullness will begin to fade because the energy channels in the body get more and more connected. You finally get to the point when everything settles down and is really, really still.

And then there's the challenge of learning how to stay there.

Again, all too often people get to a nice spot in the concentration and then they say, "Okay, I've done that. What's next?" Well, what's next is learning how to inhabit what you've just explored or what you've just been able to put together. Learn how to keep it going. That, too, is a skill and it's an important one. You're going to learn some interesting things about the mind as you do that skill. You have to remind yourself that you're learning things about the mind as you maintain it in concentration. Otherwise, part of the mind will say, "Well, where's the insight?" Actually, this

is where you're going to find the insight: the little things that come up in the mind that could destroy your concentration – catching them in time.

Try to catch them as quickly as you can, and you learn things. Oh! The mind still has a tendency to go after this. Or it has the tendency to go after that. Or it starts getting complacent. Because no matter how good the concentration is, there's always more work to be done. And the energy, sense of well-being and the nourishment that come from the concentration are meant to be used for that work.

You're going to stay with a sense of the breath not even moving. You're developing the focus and the consistency that you're going to need eventually to go drop the perception of body and tune consistently in to the perception and sensation of space, and then after that to focus on awareness in and of itself. That's where you hit the important principle in the practice: that this present awareness here is *always* here. It's not going to be anything new when you find it; simply that it's going to be a lot steadier. And your ability to stay with it and not get dislodged is going to be a lot more solid.

As we noted today, this is what you want to focus on when there's no more breath to look at—in other words, when your body is going its separate directions. Things are closing in on you; the whole world is going to start feeling like it's going to close in, close in. Your body closes in, and most people feel they have to get out of the way. They go jumping for something else. But no, you don't have to go anywhere. Let things close in, but you don't stand in the way or jump out of the way, either. Just stay with that sense of awareness. If there's any pain, be firm in your conviction that the awareness will outlast the pain. Just stay right here because when you're with this awareness, that's when you can see even really subtle things arising: the craving to go here, the craving to go there. You'll be able to catch sight of this in time because there's a lot less to distract you, a lot less to obscure things.

So we start with the breath. It's like a string through a maze that takes us into the mind. Or it's like that trail of

breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel left on the path so that they could trace their way back out of the woods. We get to the breath. We hold on to the breath, not for the sake of the breath, but for the sake of the mind, so that we can get a sense of what this awareness in and of itself is. We can think about it and of course, it's right here. But to be able to divide it out so that it's there on its own: This can be done only through the kind of discernment that comes with strong concentration.

In Ajaan Lee's image, it's like heating a rock. When the rock is hot enough, whatever tin is in there is going to melt, come out on its own. You don't have to go through and separate the tin atoms from the other atoms in the rock. When the temperature is right, the silver will come out, and then the gold. When they reach their melting points, they all come out. It's the same with this sense of awareness. As the breath falls away, other things fall away. There's just that sense of awareness: knowing, knowing, knowing. That's the oneness of the mind knowing. It's not the ultimate goal, but it's a good place to be so you can see things clearly.

So remember, we're not here to be perfect breathers. We're here to find the mind. The breath is just the bait that we use to catch it.