

Adult Education

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In the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, he starts by telling you to notice when it's long, when it's short. In other words, get sensitive to variations in the breath. When you breathe quickly for a while, what does that feel like? When the breath slows down, what does that feel like? When it's deep, when it's shallow, you try to notice these things.

But then the practice of meditation goes beyond just noticing. In all the remaining steps, he says that you train yourself. For instance, you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Some people find that they can get that sense of full-body awareness right away. Others find that it's easier to go through the body section by section first, noticing how the breathing process feels in the different parts of the body, and then, when you've explored things section by section, you can start putting everything together. From there, you train yourself to calm the effect of the breath on the body; try to gain a sense of the breath energy filling the body, so that the need for in-and-out breathing grows less and less, and the sense of the energy flow in the body gets more and more gentle. Not weak, gentle. It's strong and it's full, but there's a sense of gentleness to it. It feels really good, soothing, calming to be right here with the breath.

And so on with all the other steps in breath meditation. In every case, it's a type of training. The word for training—*sikkhā*—is also the word they use for education. This is a kind of education here; learning some important skills. In the course of learning about the breath, you're also going to be learning about your mind, learning about the movements of the mind. You give the mind one thing to focus on, and very quickly you notice that it's going to focus on other things instead. Which you might not have really noticed, unless you'd given yourself one thing, one task to stick to.

So you learn things about the actions of the mind. As you get really sensitive to the actions of the mind, you begin to see how they come out in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds, and how these things shape your life. This is all an important education. It's a large part of our standard education that's missing. More and more, you see people calling for an education that trains you to be a good worker, to feed you into the mill. I was reading just the other day an editorial where they were saying the problem with our country is that our education system isn't designed to create better workers – as if that was all that was important. So when the system doesn't really care about whether you're going to be happy or not as a worker, you've got to train yourself, educate yourself, in how to be happy through your own resources. And this is what the meditation is; it's a self-education. You learn the basic principles, but then you

have to train yourself in those principles. Regardless of how old you are, it's important to learn this skill, to get this education.

We think of life as starting out with the first twenty years or so as the time for education, and then it's time to work—but that, again, is somebody else's perception. It doesn't have to be the perception that you apply to your own life. What kind of education is important for you? What skills do you really want to master? And what's the value of your time? A life spent with a good job or whatever is fulfilling for some people, but not for others. Especially when you look at your life and ask yourself, "Have you learned how to not suffer? Have you learned how to act in ways that are skillful—in ways that don't cause suffering to yourself, don't cause any harm to anyone else?" That's a skill, that's an education that's really worth mastering, and the time dedicated to that is not wasted.

So think of your time here as part of your education, and however long it takes to master these skills is all time well spent. Of course, the more heedful you are and the more diligent you are in the practice, the more fruitful the time will be.

And always keep in mind the Buddha's four principles for reaching what he calls the deathless. That's something really worth reaching, and it's a genuine milestone in your education. The first step is to try to find people of integrity; people that you can live with, pick up habits from, gain instruction from. The instruction itself is the second step: that you listen to the true Dhamma from these people. And you have to recognize what's true Dhamma and what's not. Just as we have education for corporations, we now have meditation and Dhamma for corporations, which is not necessarily a Dhamma for individuals. So listen to the true Dhamma and then, as the third step, apply appropriate attention, which means asking, "How can this be used to understand stress? How can this be used to understand the nature of the actions of the mind, to see where they're causing stress, where they're not?" This is so that you can identify the cause, and then learn how to abandon it. What are the practices that help you identify and abandon that cause, so that the stress and suffering that come from your actions can cease?

Then, when you've applied appropriate attention to these teachings—when you've figured out where these various teachings apply, and what you should do with them to put an end to suffering—the fourth step is to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, which means practicing in a way that helps you give rise to a sense of dispassion for the actions you've been doing that cause stress and suffering.

The actions, here, are not just outside actions, of course. They include actions in the mind as well, the way you perceive things, the way you construct your thoughts. You learn how to watch these things—and again, this practice with the breath is a very good place to watch that, because you notice the way you perceive the breath has a huge impact on how you experience the process of breathing. If you think there are only those two little holes in your nose that the

breath can come through, the breathing process is going to be a lot more stressful and take a lot more work. But if you think of the breath as energy coming in and out of the body in all directions, it's a very open and light process, a lot more nourishing.

Then you apply that knowledge of the power of perceptions to other areas of your life as well—because there are so many perceptions that we act on that cause harm, cause stress, cause suffering, but we're not aware of them. If we like to do those things, we tend to ignore the stress. But the Buddha says to look at that, and ask yourself, "Is there a better way to act?" This is why it's important to have good examples around, because if you're living with a lot of bad examples, all you can think about are all the bad options all around you. Well, there are better options in the world. Look for them.

So there are these four principles: finding people of integrity to study with; listening to the true Dhamma, applying appropriate attention, and then practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—in other words, learning how to change whatever attitudes and habits you have that you find are contributing to the stress and suffering in your life. These are the basic principles of a good education. Of course, this is adult education. It's not just for kids, of course, and it's not just for adults. Young people can study this as well, but it's an education that doesn't end when you're twenty or thirty. It keeps on going as long as it takes, but a even a whole life dedicated to this type of education is a life well spent.