

## *A Practice, Personal & Social*

*January 9, 2015*

When you focus the mind on the breath, you're focusing on an area that nobody else can know: how you experience the breath from within, how you experience the movements of your own mind from within. People could look at you from the outside and see the rhythm of your breathing and they might notice expressions flitting across your face, but how you feel the breathing, how you feel your mind, the emotions going through, thoughts going through: That's something only you can know. It's a very private area. And this is the area where we practice. This is where we try to develop some skill.

The fact that it's your own direct experience is one of the reasons why it's so difficult to talk about, say, breath energies in the body, because if you don't have the concept and you're not familiar with what it means, it can be confusing. As you get more and more familiar with this area inside, though, you begin to see it's good to have a vocabulary to describe the different properties of how you feel the body: the warmth, coolness, the solidity, the energy that's either moving or still, the sense of space that surrounds the body.

Even more internal is the discussion going on in your mind. A thought comes up and it's as if it's been sent around an office. Different departments in the office have their opinions on whether the thought should be sent up to the boss or disguised or suppressed or sent to the wastebasket. A lot of how we experience the world is from this internal dialogue. And it's a part that nobody else can know.

There are periods of life where nobody can even penetrate in to get to you in there—when you're first born, for instance. You look at a little child crying and crying, and it just breaks your heart. You have no idea what the problem is. You want to do what you can, but the child can't tell you what's wrong. Also, when people are really sick, on the verge of death, there comes a point where you can't get through to them.

In Thailand they have an old custom of printing books at funerals, and usually in front of each book will be a little description of the life of the person who died. They can do this because sometimes the funerals last for a long time

and it may be a long time after a person's death before the cremation, so they have time to print a book. They insert a little biography in, and the biography follows a certain pattern. It talks about the person as a child, growing up, their education, married life, children, and then as they get older a little disease here, a little disease there, and at first the doctors can take care of it but then the disease gets worse and worse and finally gets to the point where the doctors can't help anymore.

Reading these biographies, you can't help but stop and think: What do you do then? Medical science can take you only so far, and then you're on your own. This is why it's good to have these skills developed deep down inside.

So when pain comes up and you know death is near, how do you manage your mind so you don't suffer? How do you manage it so that the transition is smooth? That's a skill we learn through the meditation. It's very private, very personal. And it gives rise to the idea that what the Buddha's teaching here is totally individual: Each person for him or herself and that's it.

But the practice also takes place in a social context. Think back to the story of the Buddha's leaving home. We often hear the story that he slipped out of the palace and didn't tell anybody. But in the Canon it doesn't describe it that way. When he left home, his parents knew what was happening. I'm sure his wife knew what was happening. But he felt that there was something important that he had to accomplish. That was back it was in the days when a young husband might decide that, in order to support his family well, he had to leave home for a while, to go out and find his way, find treasure in the world and then come back.

That's precisely what the Buddha did. He went into the wilderness on his own but he came back after he'd found that treasure and he shared it with the family. And it was an important treasure: the way to the deathless, the skill of how to deal with this internal area in a way that would lead beyond suffering of every kind.

In doing so, of course, he had to depend on the generosity of the people out there in the wilderness. You find that this life of being a meditator is not totally solitary. In my own case, living as a monk, I've met more people or more kinds, on more levels of society, than I would ever have met if I'd stayed a layperson. And you meet people in a really good level. As a monk, you go out

for alms in the morning and people put food in your bowl. You don't have to ask, and they don't ask for any particular favor in return. They just want to support you in the practice. But you do feel a debt. In fact, as the Buddha said, it's only when you become an arahant that you eat the alms food of the country without incurring a debt. At the very least, you want to get your practice really good so that if they want advice, you can give them good advice. If they simply want the merit of being generous to someone who is a serious practitioner, they can get that merit. In fact, the Buddha lists that as one of the reasons why you want to practice hard: so that those who provide you with your food, clothing, shelter, and medicine will get a lot of merit from it.

At the same time, the act of receiving a gift of food every day keeps you alert, keeps you heedful, especially when you're on the receiving end of a poor person's generosity. Many were the times when I'd pass this one little hut in particular, a young couple who'd just gotten married. The hut was just big enough for the two of them to lie down inside. Their kitchen was a little tiny thing out behind the hut. But every day they came out and put something in my bowl: a little piece of sausage, some dried fish, something. When you're on the receiving end of a poor person's generosity, you feel a huge burden of debt, a huge obligation. You realize that we're all in this together. The benefits that come from your practice of straightening out your own mind don't end just with your own mind. We live with one another, we have an impact on one another, and the better the state of your mind, the better the impact you have on other people and the more you have to offer.

Although in many ways, as a meditator, your time is very much your time, still there are other ways in which it's not your time at all. This is one of the good things about the skills the Buddha teaches, the kind of happiness that he trains us in. It doesn't have clear boundaries. It's not just your happiness as opposed to somebody else's. With the happiness that comes from material things—material gain, status, praise, physical pleasures—the more you have, the less somebody else has. The pursuit of those kinds of pleasures really creates a sense of divide. Whereas the happiness that comes from being generous, the happiness that comes from being virtuous, or the happiness that comes from meditating, actually erase boundaries. So the question of whether this is your

own practice for your sake or your practice for the sake of other people is not an issue. It's both.

So as you work on your mind and try to get in touch with this dimension that you're going to have to depend on, these internal skills that you're going to have to depend on, it's a gift to yourself and to other people. Think about people you've known who've been close to death and have no control over their minds at all. Think of the heartbreak that it creates for the people around them. That's opposed to the people who can face death and not suffer. The second group creates a lot less suffering for the people around them as well.

So learning these skills is not a selfish thing. You're not the only one who's going to benefit. Try to keep that in mind: that although this is a personal practice, it's not just a personal thing for your own good. It's for the good of everybody you know.