

Breath Meditation – The Four Tetrads

February 5, 2015

Ajaan Lee often made the point that when you're sitting here focused on the breath, you've got all four frames of reference for the establishing of mindfulness. The breath is the body. The feelings of ease or disease associated with the breath are feelings. The quality of your mind, of course, relates to mind. And the good and bad qualities that are going through the mind relate to dhammas.

Now, because the 16 steps of breath meditation are divided into four tetrads and each tetrad is associated with one of those frames of reference, the same point applies with those 16 steps. In other words, you can look at what you're doing right now in terms of any of the tetrads and choose which one is most helpful for whatever you're dealing with—because you're working on them all together at the same time.

In terms of the body, the Buddha says to be aware of the breath to see whether it's long or short. You can expand that to other qualities of the breath: whether it's heavy, light, fast or slow, deep or shallow. Then he says try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in all the way and breathe out all the way, and try to calm bodily fabrications. The pattern he's establishing here—and it's one that carries through each of the tetrads—is that you first try to get sensitive to this particular aspect of your awareness and then learn how to manipulate it as a form of fabrication. Energize it for a while, and then realize the best way to manipulate it is to calm it down. That relates directly to his teachings on tranquility and insight. Tranquility is getting things calm; insight is seeing things in terms of fabrication. So you're working on both qualities at the same time.

With feelings, he says to start off by trying to be aware of pleasure and rapture as you breathe in and breathe out. Then become sensitive to what he calls mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions—to see how they have an impact on the mind. Some ways of perceiving the breath are going to be calming; others are going to be more stimulating. Often it's going to depend on what you need right now. But eventually as he says you want to calm those feelings and perceptions down. What kind of perceptions, what kind of feelings are most calming for the mind? Try to take your practice in that direction.

Now, it's not the case that you have feelings floating off in some realm of reality separate from the breath. They're very closely connected to how you're breathing. How can you breathe to give rise to pleasure? How do you breathe to give rise to rapture? What ways of creating feelings through the breath or what

perceptions of the breath are you employing right now? Are they helpful to getting the mind to settle down or are they not? What can you do to make them more helpful?

So these two tetrads are simply two different ways of looking at one process.

Bringing in the mind as the third tetrad adds another dimension. You start out by simply being aware of the mind as you breathe in and breathe out. Then you start to notice, does the mind need to be gladdened? Okay, what can you do to energize it? This will again relate directly to the way you're breathing, or to the perceptions or feelings you're focusing on: perceptions you're using for the breath, and the feelings associated with the breath that you're creating through your act of attention right now. What effect do they have on the mind? What can stimulate the mind or gladden the mind, as the Buddha says?

Does the mind need to be made more steady and concentrated? If so, which perceptions and feelings make it more steady? And if there's anything that's not skillful in the mind, how do you release the mind from it?

"Release," here, can apply to many different levels of the practice. You can release it from your lust, you can release it from your anger, you can release it from your laziness, you can release it from all sorts of unskillful things just to get it into concentration. Once you've got it in concentration, then you want to look more carefully: What things are you still holding on to? Some of the things you're holding on to right now you're going to need to keep holding on to, otherwise you'll just float away from the breath. So you need to make a distinction: Which things are necessary for you right now and which things are you holding on to right now that are superfluous? But again, the basic process is this: Sensitize yourself to this aspect of your awareness and then figure out what you can do to use your awareness of how you fabricate these things to calm them down.

The fourth tetrad deals with dhammas. It starts out with inconstancy. You breathe in and out focused on inconstancy, and then you go through dispassion, cessation, relinquishment. Here again, this analysis can function on many different levels. To begin with, you have to clear away your distractions, what the Buddha calls greed and distress with reference to the world. Your sense of yourself in the world and what you want out of the world and whether you're satisfied or dissatisfied with the world: All of these things are going to come barging in on your meditation if you're not careful. So it's good for you to see that whatever it is that you're attracted to is not going to last. Whatever issues you have in the world right now are going to be very small in terms of the long course of time. Look at the pleasure you might get out of thinking about these things. That's pretty inconstant, too.

Try to use this insight. From inconstancy it goes to stress, and from stress it goes to not-self. If something is inconstant, stressful, do you want to latch on to it, do you want to claim it as yours? Once you realize that you don't, that's when you begin to develop dispassion for it. You begin to realize that *you* are the one who is creating this particular fabrication because of your passion. Once there's dispassion, it stops. And you'd be amazed at how many things you really are creating and fabricating in your awareness. Then you give the whole thing up. Even the insight that said, "Ah, yes, I understand this": You give that up, too. Otherwise, you sit here for the next rest of the hour just smiling to yourself about how clever you are, and then you miss everything else that's going on in your meditation. So you gain this insight and say, "Oh my gosh, I've been holding on to that," and you let it go.

In each tetrad, it's a very basic kind of process: sensitizing yourself to the extent to which you're fabricating things; trying to calm that fabrication down; and ultimately getting to the point where, if it's unskillful, you just let it go. Then further along in the practice, you let go of even more skillful forms of fabrications. Where it gets complicated is the fact that a lot of things going on in the mind are things that you might not expect. The insights you're going to gain you can't plan out ahead of time, saying, "Today we're going to gain insight into stress; tomorrow we're going to gain insight into not-self." It doesn't work that way.

You have to gain insight into the particulars around your attachments. Say that there's a distraction going on in the mind: What's keeping you with that distraction? What's saying, "Yeah, I want to go for that"? All too often, if we don't see that, we find ourselves in the midst of the distraction without questioning: What was the voice that made the decision to go here? Who is that? What purpose does it have? How wise is it? What perceptions underlie that?

The *ajanas* keep stressing again and again: It's the perceptions, the labels we put in the mind that are the real culprits here. They can take anything and dress it up in any shape at all, make it attractive, make it interesting, make it anything at all to make it seem worth getting worked up about. Then they can disguise it from you; they can disguise themselves from you.

So you want to be able to see through these disguises. This is where it gets complicated—but also fascinating. In the basic process, it seems pretty simple: You see the fact that you're fabricating unnecessary stress, and once you see that it's not necessary, that it's weighing you down, you stop. But the ways in which you're fabricating those things are subtle and convoluted—which is why you have to get the mind really quiet, as quiet as you can, and yet alert, so that you can detect these subtle movements in the mind.

So while you're sitting here focusing on the breath, these are the four areas you can pay attention to. If you find that your mind is not settling down, okay, why? What's the problem? How's the breath? Does the breath feel good? If not, you can work on that. How do you know whether it's good or not? Try to get an awareness that fills the whole body so that you can have a sense of the breath energies everywhere in the body. How do you breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, pleasure, rapture? At what point does rapture become a little too oppressive? How is your state of mind right now? Is your energy up? Is it down? Are you holding on to anything that you need to let go of?

And notice that when the Buddha talks about letting go, he's got that image of a fire in the mind. The belief in those days was that when fire burns, it clings to its fuel. And in clinging to its fuel, it's trapped. In other words, the fuel is not clinging to the fire, it's the fire that's clinging to the fuel. That's why, when the fire lets go, it's freed from the fuel. The same with the mind: The things that are trapping you right now don't have their clutches on you—you have your clutches on them. You want to look to see: Why? What is it in the mind that perceives these things as worth holding on to?

As for dhammas, whatever's distracting you right now, learn to analyze it in terms of it being inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Realize that you don't want to get involved with it. When you're not involved, it goes away.

So keep this basic pattern in mind. And keep in mind this sense of the four areas where you can be paying attention, because that understanding will see you through far. It's simply that things get more precise and more detailed, sometimes more counterintuitive. But by getting your mind really still and learning how to use this understanding of fabrications that can come with each of these four areas, you can get it still enough to see fabrications you didn't expect were there. That's how you work yourself free.