

## *A Sense of Space Inside*

*February 20, 2015*

Allow your attention to settle on the breath. And hold in mind the perception that the whole body is breathing: all the nerves, all the blood vessels, all the cells.

That creates a nice spacious sense here in the present.

See how long you can maintain that perception—and what happens to your sense of the body, your sense of yourself sitting here as you keep that perception in mind. Read the various sensations you have in the body in terms of that perception. It helps give you a grounding.

You want the mind to settle here in the present moment but to do that, you have to give it a sense of ease and well-being to settling in to. You don't want it to feel like it's imprisoned here in the present but you do want it to stay.

So if you can find someplace in the body where the breathing feels really comfortable, focus your main attention on that. Then think of that sense of comfort spreading around, so that as you breathe in, the whole body feels comfortable. There may be pains here and there, or patterns of tension here and there, but try to breathe around them.

We're trying to put the mind in a position where it can observe itself. After all, the whole point of the teaching is that the suffering that really weighs us down is the suffering created by the mind itself. There may be things happening outside that we don't like—and some of them can be *really* bad—but the question of whether that exterior influence is going to have an influence on the mind has a lot to do with how the mind relates to things outside and how it relates to itself. We're trying to change the balance of power, change the mind's habits.

As the Buddha said, the kind of suffering we're dealing with is the suffering that comes from craving and clinging. Craving and clinging give rise to what he calls "becoming."

Becoming is when you take on an identity around a particular desire. You want things to be a certain way. You look at yourself and you ask, "Okay, what do I have within me that can actually bring that desire about? How about the world around me? What is there in the world that can help bring that desire about? And also, what's going to get in the way? What do I have inside that gets in the way?"

When you start asking those questions, you get into what the Buddha calls becoming: a sense of identity in a particular world of experience, all based around a particular desire. You notice that desires define the way you experience not only yourself but also the world.

If you have a desire for chocolate, you immediately know where in the world chocolate is, and what's getting in the way of you getting it.

If you have a desire for a new car, a new partner, those are the parts of the world that become relevant: either the things that help you get what you want or the things that get in the way. Everything else becomes irrelevant.

When you look at this process, you begin to realize that you go through many different becomings in the course of a day. When you're hungry for food, the desire to feed that hunger takes on a certain kind of becoming. When you're hungry for companionship, that's another kind of becoming.

It all depends on how you read your hungers and then how you build up a sense of yourself and the world around you in terms of your desire to assuage the hungers as you read them. We tend to be very much inside our becomings, which is why we can't see them clearly. What we're trying to do as we practice is to create a little space around those becomings so that we can step back and see, "Oh, this is how the process happens."

You come to realize that you have a choice to identify or not identify with those particular becomings. And you're much less a slave to them.

Every aspect of the practice, starting from generosity on up, is a way of stepping back from your ordinary total involvement in a particular sense of who you are.

Think back to when you were a child and you had things that you wanted, toys that you wanted, food that you wanted. Then there came a time when you realized that you could give those things away.

You stepped back from your normal hungers. You may not have commented on it in this way to yourself, but there was a sense of space around your old identity as you stepped back from it.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha encourages generosity, because it helps us get out of our fixation on things. You step back and realize you have more than enough of something to share. That changes your sense of who you are and it creates a little space. You realize you have the choice: You can keep something or you can give it away.

That's one of the advantages of having this sense of space around your becomings, as you realize you have choices, that there was a choice someplace in that process that made you take on the identity but you can also unchoose it, change your mind.

You learn the same lessons with the precepts. The precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex, intoxicants, lying: If you find yourself involved in any of those activities and you realize, "Oh, there's a precept against this," you can step back.

“Do I really want to carry through with this?” You step back and you can start observing yourself. What were the desires that got you involved with those activities in the first place? Do you really want to follow through with them? Especially when you think about the long-term consequences of following through.

Even more so as you get into meditation: You’re sitting here focusing on the breath, and other thoughts are going to come up. It’s all too easy to drop the breath and go into whatever becoming bubbles up into the mind.

If you have a desire to think about yesterday, all of a sudden you’re there: yesterday. Think about tomorrow. Think about tomorrow’s meal. Think about tomorrow’s activities. You’re there. Even though you’re sitting here in the body, you’re in another world. Then suddenly you realize, “Oh, I wandered off.” It’s like being in a dream and suddenly waking up: “I’m supposed to be here meditating.” So you come back to the breath.

In the beginning stages, this is a lot of what the meditation is about: being with the breath for a while and then forgetting and going off into some other world. But when you realize, okay, you can be with the breath and these thoughts can come up and you don’t have to go with them, that’s when concentration gets stronger. You realize that you have this alternative place to stay, and by making it really comfortable and spacious, you make it easier to stay here without falling asleep.

That sense of space is important. If you’re focused on one little tiny point, and the breath gets more and more refined until you lose that point, you’re off into what they call delusion concentration, where you’re still but you’re not really clear about what you’re focused on or where you are. When you come out, there’s the question, “Was I asleep?” Well, not really. “Was I awake?” No, you weren’t really awake.

To prevent that, as soon as there’s a sense of well-being in the body, spread your awareness to fill the whole body. Then when you’re in this enlarged frame of reference and a thought bubbles up, you see it as a bubble and you realize you don’t have to get into the bubble. After all, the bubble will float away for a while and then break. Do you really want to go there? You’ve been in lots of bubbles in the past. How about staying right here? What happens as you stay right here?

This brings a larger sense of awareness, a larger sense of choice. You realize you have choices that you didn’t see before. Even more so as you start developing discernment around all this: You begin to see, “Oh, these are the steps by which the mind creates its sense of self and creates its sense of the world. And this is the suffering or the stress that results. Do I really want to go there?”

When you realize you have the alternative, you don't have to go there. Then there's an even greater sense of spaciousness and freedom in the mind.

We look particularly into things arising in the mind, but it's not just enough to see that they come and they go and they come and they go. There's more to insight than just arising and passing away. There's what the Buddha calls origination, which means that when things arise, there's a cause, and the cause is something you're doing.

Particularly when stress gets stronger in the mind, you want to be able to see, "What did I do just then?" To see that, you have to be able to step back. You need that larger sense of space around what you're doing.

You see the choices that were involved in these steps in the process. A lot of times it's done on automatic pilot: It's so habitual that it becomes part of the background, like the pattern on wallpaper. You want to look into that pattern. Don't just leave it in the background. Look at it.

How does the mind take on these identities? How does it drop one and pick up another? The fact that you're with the breath, with the body, gives some space around the process so that you can step back and watch it. If you can't step back, you're going to be in it, and when you're in it, you can't really observe it.

Of course, this sense of space itself is a kind of becoming, and it's one of the last ones you let go of. In the meantime, though, learn to make use of it. It allows you to free yourself from a lot of your old habits that are weighing the mind down with stress, weighing it down with a sense of being burdened by things.

So try to use the Buddha's teachings on generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment to create some space around the processes of the mind. This gives you room to back up and watch. When you've got that room, you're that much closer to being freed from all these old habits.

You see that there are other ways you can relate to the world, other ways in which the mind can relate to itself, that place less of a burden on you and less of a burden on the people around you.