

Constant, Easeful, Self

September 2, 2015

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to Rahula, his son, he prefaced the instructions on breath meditation with a list of some things to contemplate first. Two of the contemplations were about inconstancy and not-self. Now, it may seem strange that he put these at the beginning of the meditation because these perceptions, these contemplations, are contemplations of discernment. The implication, though, is that even as you're practicing concentration, you've got to apply some discernment to what you're doing; to understand what you're doing and to understand how to get past distractions to your practice.

And it seems primarily that what the Buddha was focusing on was that when something comes into the mind to interfere with your focus on the breath, you want to reflect on the fact that it is inconstant and it is not-self, nothing you want to get involved with. As for the breath, Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you're focusing on the breath, you're pushing in the opposite direction from those reflections. In other words, you're trying to take something inconstant, which is your concentration together with your mindfulness, and you're trying to make it more constant. You're trying to take something stressful, painful even sometimes—the body can be painful, even if it's just the stress of holding everything together in the body—and you're trying to make it easeful.

And, of course there's the stress of actually doing the concentration, developing a new skill. That takes effort and it requires you have a mature attitude toward your goals. In other words, you are focused on getting there, but you also know that if you focus only on the goal and not on the steps toward the goal, you're never going to get there.

Then, finally, you're taking something that's not-self—the mind's tendency to just wander aimlessly all over the place—and bring it more under your control. When the Buddha talks about the concept of self, that's the primary marker of something that would be worthy of calling self: that it be something you can control. If you can't control something, how can really say that it's you or yours?

We look at the mind and it may seem to be all over the place, and part of the mind will want to say, "Okay, well, just admit that it's inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and just leave it at that. That counts as insight." But that doesn't accomplish anything. That kind of insight actually short-circuits the path.

So as you practice concentration, you're pushing against those three characteristics or those three perceptions. You try to stay with the breath as

constantly as you can. There's a feedback loop between the constancy of your focus and the pleasure that comes as a result. In other words, if you can keep your focus steady and calm, the breath tends to become more comfortable just on its own. And then as it gets more comfortable, it gets easier to stay focused. So the two qualities of being more constant and being more easeful feed each other, nourish each other.

And if the mind slips off, bring it back. Don't just say, "Well, it's not-self" and let it wander around, looking at the scenery or planning for tomorrow, thinking about yesterday. You bring it right back to the breath. And you keep bringing it back to the breath. No matter how many times it wanders off, you keep coming back.

Try to make the breath easeful and be on the lookout for the next time the mind is going to wander off. This morning I was talking to someone who was dealing with the issue of whether—when you're sitting there, pulling the mind back, pulling the mind back, pulling the mind back—that really counts as meditation. Actually, it's a crucial skill in the meditation: recognizing when you've wandered off and bringing the mind back. If you don't fight this tendency to wander, it's going to take over. It's going to be in charge. And then, what's going to happen, say, when you're sick or you're getting older or you're about to die? You want your mind to be as much under your control as possible. But if you can't control it now while you're in a relatively good shape, how are you going to control it then? So you try to catch it as quickly as you can and bring it back. Then the combination of these qualities of trying to be as constant and as easeful as you can, and exerting some control, will actually bring the mind to a state of concentration.

Now, whether it happens quickly or slowly, that's not the issue, but you can be confident that if you work at it in these ways, you'll begin to get results. And as the mind gets quieter—in other words, the concentration gets more constant—you begin to see subtler things in the mind and you can actually start seeing the mind as it's wandering off at earlier and earlier steps in the process.

What you're seeing is what the Buddha calls "becoming." A little world develops in the mind and then you go into it. It's that combination of the world developing and your going into it: That's becoming and birth. And it's driven by desire. There are lots of stages or steps in the process by which these little worlds to develop, and the only way you're going to see them in a way that's really going to make a difference is if you're trying to be as still as possible as you create a state of becoming with the breath. You're here. You're the meditator in charge and you want to develop that sense of identity of your being in charge as much as you can.

The world here, of course, is the world of the body, the breath throughout the body. Once you're clear about this state of becoming, you see clearly when the mind starts slipping off to other ones.

As for other worlds outside of your concentration, as the Buddha said, you put aside greed and distress or you subdue greed and distress with reference to those other worlds so that you can fully inhabit this one. Those other worlds, of course, would be the other becomings that come into your mind—wanting to think about tomorrow, wanting to think about yesterday, your plans for tomorrow, your memories of last week, or whatever.

If you're really still and can fight the tendency for the mind to just drift off into these other becomings, you can see the process more easily and you begin to see how the mind modulates from one level of becoming to another, in the same way that a piece of music might modulate from one key to another. The different keys in music tend to have certain notes in common, so you go to the common notes and suddenly you find yourself in another key. It's the same here: One becoming will come up with an image and then you suddenly you take that image and run. That's one way it can happen.

Then there's another way it can happen. It's a total blank out. You're here with the breath and before you know it, you're someplace else entirely.

Well, you want to watch both processes carefully. And the only way to see them is to fight them. Try to catch the process more and more quickly. Make the mind more and more still. Make your focus on the breath steadier. The steadier your focus, the slighter, subtler things you're going to see as the mind begins to move away.

You finally realize that many times when a thought first arises in the mind, it's not really a thought. It's just a stirring of energy. Even before it's recognized as a thought, there's going to be that stirring. And there's actually a moment's decision when you decide what the thought is. You may think that you're asking to see what the thought already is about, but it's actually more your decision right now: What do you *want* to think about? You've got a list of things that you're interested in and you can slap one of them on the stirring and run with it.

When you can see the fact that these are decisions, then you have more control over them. Otherwise, it's as if you're the president of a company. You sit up on the top floor. You think you're making the decisions that run the company, but actually the middle-level management or the lower-level management are making the decisions. Occasionally they'll send word up to you about this or that, so you make those decisions. But other decisions are pretty much left on automatic pilot. And as they say in Thailand, many times when the middle-level management

sends something up, they've already mixed it for you. In other words, they present it in terms that are pretty much going to force your decision one way or another. So if you don't get the mind really clear, really still, really constant in its gaze, you're not going to know these things for what they are: that you've got a ready-mixed decision handed onto you. You want to get down to see: What was mixed into it? Why were these things mixed into it?

So as Ajaan Lee says, we're fighting against inconstancy, stress, and not-self, taking what's inconstant and turning it into something more constant; taking something stressful, making it easeful; taking something that has been out of your control and bringing it under your control, making it more "self," fighting against not-self. Ultimately, of course, you will run up against certain limitations. There's only so much that you can make constant and easeful and self in the mind. And that's when the contemplation goes to a deeper level. But you won't get to that deeper level until you've fought against those three perceptions, those three characteristics, and see for yourself how really far you can get things under your control.

So do what you can to get the mind interested in the breath, to make the sensation of the breathing in the body really pleasant, really easeful, something that feels gratifying, something that feels interesting, attractive. There are parts of the body that haven't been getting good breath energy. They would really like it if you gave them some, and you find that you really like it, too. There's the sense in which the breath starts taking on a taste, a flavor, that it wouldn't have otherwise, especially if you're used to just doing it mechanically. You can think that there are different selves in the body that have different breath needs and you're here in a position where you can send the breath to the different parts of the body that need it. They're going to especially appreciate it because they've been starved for such a long time. That way, you take parts of the body that have been painful and you turn them into a sense of well-being, and because they've been starved for so long, it feels really, really good. It can get pretty riveting when you find parts of the body that have been malnourished for so long and they finally do get nourished by the breath. And this way, you find that it's easier to make your gaze more constant.

So it's in fighting against those characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self that you really learn about the mind. You learn the limitations of what you can make constant and easeful. The fact that you've learned these things for yourself is what makes these lessons go deep down inside where they really can make a difference.