

The Noble Truths of the Breath

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To get the mind to settle down, you need to give it a comfortable place to stay. That's why we work with the breath. Or you can say we play with the breath. In other words, we experiment to see what kind of breathing feels good. You can try long breathing or shorter breathing. It's good to start with long breathing to energize the body a little bit. Keep it up until you've decided that long breathing feels tiresome. Then you can let the breath grow shorter, more shallow. But you can also try faster or slower, heavier or lighter. Taste the breath. Decide what you'd like to taste right now, what appeals to you.

It's important when you're dealing with the breath—and you're trying to make it comfortable—that your frame of reference be broad. Otherwise, if you're focused on too narrow a spot and the breath starts to get very refined, you lose your focus. You don't know where you are. So once the breath gets comfortable, try to spread your awareness around throughout the body. Think of the breath spreading through the body as well.

When we use the word *breath* here, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy throughout the body—the energy that flows through the nerves, the blood vessels, the muscles, out to the pores of the skin. You'll notice that in some parts of the body it's more obvious than in others. Focus on the obvious parts, the parts that are comfortable. Once you've learned to maintain that sense of comfort, and it is a skill... Sometimes you get really excited when it feels really good and then you've lost it. So try to have a balanced state of the mind as you deal with this sense of ease.

Once you've got that sense of ease, think of it spreading around. Think of the breath spreading around as well. Maintain that broad frame of awareness. And if the mind slips off, just drop whatever it is that it slipped after, and you'll be right back at the breath. If it does it again, bring it back again. Each time you come back, try to reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good. Think of some part of the body that needs a little extra energy, and provide that. Think of the breath going there immediately as you breathe in. It might be down in the middle

of the brain, in the area of the heart, the area of the stomach, or some of the more outer parts of the body that need to be refreshed. We look for these areas and refresh them because the qualities of right concentration are pleasure and refreshment. And you can create those qualities by the way you breathe.

The question sometimes comes up: Here we are, working with comfort, but isn't the whole point of the Dhamma to understand suffering? Well, how are you going to understand the subtle ways in which the mind makes itself suffer unless you can create a sense of ease? Then, with that sense of ease, the slightest movements of the mind that would add a little bit of extra stress become completely obvious. They're very apparent. Whereas otherwise, they'd just get lost in the general dis-ease of the body and dis-ease of the mind.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha focuses on the breath. Apparently, on the night of his own awakening, this was the topic he was focused on. And as he said, this was one of the topics that he focused on most in his meditation in general. When he describes breath meditation, it's not just a matter of being aware of the breath in the present. One time he recommended breath meditation to the monks, and one of them said, "Well, I do breath meditation already." And the Buddha said, "Oh? What kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk said, "I put aside all thoughts of the past and all hopes for the future, and just stay equanimous about what's happening in the present as I breathe in, breathe out." The Buddha said, "There is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not the one that gives the best results."

Then he laid out sixteen steps. The important point in all the steps is that as you breathe in and breathe out, you give yourself a task to do, either in making the breath comfortable, giving rise to a sense of refreshment, or in dealing with what the Buddha calls fabrication.

This is where breath meditation connects to the four noble truths. Because the way you fabricate the body is by the way you breathe. The way you fabricate the mind is through your perceptions and feelings. The feelings are not emotions; they're feeling tones—a sense of pleasure, a sense of pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. These feelings have a huge impact on the mind. They, together with the perceptions you use to communicate with yourself—the images you hold in mind, or the words by which you identify that this is this and that is that.

When the Buddha analyzes why we suffer, sometimes he takes the analysis just back to craving and sometimes he traces it further back, down to ignorance. And as he traces it back, one of things that he points out is that if you fabricate your experience—and *fabricate* here means not that you're totally making things up, but that you do have a role in shaping things—if you do it in ignorance, you're going to suffer; if you do it with knowledge, it becomes the path.

And one of things you fabricate is the state of your mind. Another is how you sense your body. The way you sense your body is through the breath. The way you fabricate the mind is through creating a sense of ease or a sense of dis-ease, and then slapping a perception on it, although sometimes the perceptions come before the feeling.

You want to see this process clearly. And here's a really good way to see it, as you focus on the breath. Because the way you perceive the breathing is going to have an impact on how you experience the breath. If you think of the breath as just the air coming in and out through the nose, that can be very restricting. It's just those two little tiny holes in the nose, and yet it's supposed to energize the whole body. To make that happen, you begin to struggle with the breath. It may not seem like much of a struggle. But if you've learned how to breathe in a way where you're thinking of the breath energy permeating throughout the body and through every pore, and then when you go back to thinking, "Oh, it's just those two little holes," you see that it does place a restriction on the energy flowing through the body. This gives you a test case: You see how perception done in ignorance can lead to stress, that some perceptions are more useful than others, and that you have the choice in how you're going to perceive things.

We exercise this choice throughout the day. For instance, when you look at a problem, you can look it from the point of view of economics, from the point of view of geology, or from the point of view of agriculture, whatever. There are lots of different frameworks we can use to look at the problems we encounter in our lives. We tend to choose the frameworks fairly willy-nilly. But the Buddha wants us to be more deliberate: What's the most useful framework for approaching your breath right now? Use the perceptions that allow the breath to feel easeful, allow the sense of ease to fill the body.

Because, after all, when the Buddha defines the first noble truth, it's the truth of suffering. It's the five clinging aggregates. And what are those aggregates? One of them is perception. And a good way to see how you cling to perceptions is to experiment with new perceptions, to see where they are useful. This is why we listen to the Dhamma to begin with. The Buddha gives us new ways of perceiving our lives to try on. And he doesn't stop there. He says to start experimenting on your own. Because, as he said, through perception you can get the breath so subtle that it actually stops.

Now, there's a part of the mind that's going to rebel at that. It doesn't like the idea. As the breath begins to calm down, sometimes it will stop for a bit, and then you get scared. But if you remind yourself that air is all around, energy is all around, that perception will help you realize that if you need to breathe, if you need the energy, it'll be there. You can think of the energy as coming in through every pore and connecting up in all the different parts of the body.

What happens is that when things settle down and get more still, the prime utilizer of oxygen in the body—i.e. the brain—settles down. So your oxygen needs go down. There's still a sense of ease in the body. You don't force yourself to stop breathing. It's just that as things settle down, settle down, settle down, the breath gets more and more subtle. And then you find that—without your even thinking about it—it stops. Just remind yourself, "I'm okay." Just having that perception—that it is okay—changes things. Otherwise, you get startled and you leave, spoiling your concentration.

So the way we're dealing with the breath connects directly with the way we perceive the present moment. We begin to understand how the way we perceive in ignorance can lead to suffering, how we cling to certain perceptions can lead to suffering. And working with the breath can give us some experience in letting go of some of that clinging, doing it with knowledge, doing it with awareness. In this way, working with the breath connects with the first and the second noble truths: comprehending clinging and abandoning craving. And of course the concentration developed with the breath connects with the fourth noble truth. So it all fits together in theory.

What you're doing right now is learning how it fits together in practice, too: seeing how you can create a sense of well-being right here, and how, from that

sense of well-being, you can observe your mind with a lot more clarity. You begin to see that the way it relates to the breath will often be connected with the way it relates to other issues as well. So you can catch yourself applying your perceptions that make you suffer and remind yourself, “I don’t have to suffer from this. I don’t have to cling to this.” Because the clinging doesn’t come just through liking perceptions—there are some perceptions that we don’t like, and yet we cling to them. We take them for granted, that this is the way things are. But when you get a sense of how your perceptions, though not be totally arbitrary, still provide you with a range of choices you can apply in any particular situation, that gives you the freedom to try out some new ones that don’t make you suffer so much.

The Buddha’s main point in teaching the four noble truths is pointing out that the suffering that weighs down the mind is the suffering we impose on ourselves. It’s not the things that the people do outside. They may do horrible things, but we don’t have to suffer from them. When we grab onto certain ideas, even just certain ways of breathing, we can weigh ourselves down. But the good news of the four noble truths is that you don’t have to do that.

There is a way out. And it starts with the simple process of getting in touch with what’s going on in the present moment by being with the breath and noticing how your mind has an impact on the way you breathe. As you develop skill around that, you learn a lot about the mind—things that are really liberating.

So even though it may not seem like much—just breathing in, breathing out—focusing on the breath in this way has a lot to offer.