

Observing the Mind at the Breath

September 5, 2016

As we focus on the breath—trying to keep it in mind, bringing the mind back every time we realize that it has wandered off, and doing what we can to keep the mind there again—our focus is on the breath, but the mind is getting trained at the same time. When you catch yourself wandering off, that's alertness. When you remember where you should be and what you should be doing, that's mindfulness. And then ardency is bringing it back as quickly and as effectively as possible.

The effectiveness here is important, because that's where a lot of discernment gets developed, too, in trying to gain a sense of your own mind—when it needs harsh treatment, when it needs soft treatment, when it needs a little energizing from the breath, when it needs to be calmed down by the breath. You learn these things as you're working with the breath. So there's no need to have a separate meditation for the mind. The mind and the breath are right here together. So keep focused on the mind and the breath at the same time, but particularly on the breath, because the mind is going to get trained willy-nilly as long as you're with the breath.

Ajaan Lee makes a lot of this point. He says that when you're with the breath properly, you've got all frames of reference right here. You've got the body; you've got the feelings; you've got the mind; you've got the mental qualities that you're trying either to develop or to drop away. The mental qualities are for use when you notice that the mind is a little bit out of balance—it's not staying with the breath—and you try to figure out why. Sometimes the problem is with the breath; sometimes it's with the mind. When you're working on the mind to give it more energy, the purpose is to get it to more consistently with the breath, and to bring its energy level up so it can stay consistently with the breath. There are other times the reason it's not here is because it has too much energy—it's frantically all over the place. So you try to use the breath or other meditation topics to calm it down. But the purpose to get it here consistently with the breath, and to drop everything that's weighing it down.

What's weighing it down? One thing you may want to notice is when the mind finally does settle down and gets quiet and is with the breath—they seem to be one and the same thing—there will still be little blips of disturbance: a rise in the level of stress that may be very minor but it's there, and then it'll fall away. This is where you have to be very observant: What came along with the rise in the stress? And what left when it fell away? Because that's where a lot of discernment

is going to come in, to see cause and effect. You have to be patient with the mind. So keep yourself occupied with the breath in the meantime, making sure that the breath is as still and as smooth and as comfortable as you can imagine.

In this way—whether you're thinking about them or not—a lot of qualities of the mind gets developed. There is patience. There's a quality that the Buddha calls intentness. In other words, you pay careful, careful attention to what you're doing, careful attention to what's here. You're trying to drop everything else around you.

This is why one of our basic principles in daily life is that if you're going to take on battles with other people, you want to choose your battles well. Remember that the Buddha was a member of the noble warrior caste. He had experience in all the training that would be given to someone in that caste. And one of the first lessons you learn as a soldier or warrior is that you don't take on every battle that comes your way. You try to figure out: "If I engaged in this battle and even if I won it, what would be the price? And is it possible to win?"

After all, the Buddha was a fighter. There's the story of his battle with Mara. But, as he said, the real battle was inside. The forces of Mara are not out there—they're in the defilements of the mind. That's the battle you want to take on. So if you *are* going to take on any auxiliary battles, you want to make sure they don't deflect your attention from this one.

I've seen cases in the forest tradition where different *ajans* would take on an issue—they wouldn't just let people roll over them. It's a sign that you shouldn't let people just roll over you, either. But they chose their battles. There was a time when Ajaan Fuang was in his hut and he heard some people coming in, and they were going to steal the monastery generator. He was alone, and there were a lot of them. He knew who they were, but he realized that going down and fighting them to save the generator wasn't worth it. So he let them steal the generator.

Other times, though, when other people in the area tried to get their hands on the money in the monastery account, he fought them off. Even though they had verbally attacked him and talked many people into not coming to the monastery, he realized that that was a battle worth fighting, because he had to establish a precedent. If people can just come in and take the money from the monastery, what will you have left?

So in your daily life as a meditator, you have to realize that some battles you can take on, and others you shouldn't. Choose your battles well, so that when the time comes to sit down and meditate, you don't have too many issues warring in your mind. That way, you can take on the battle here inside, which is: What can you do to keep the mind with the breath? What can you do to keep it still, so it can observe itself properly?

What do we observe when we observe the mind? As I said, we observe the rise and fall of the level of stress. If something is disturbing the mind, what can you do to undercut it? Sometimes working with the breath directly will help with that; sometimes you have to bring in other topics, like contemplation of the body, goodwill, any of the recollections—the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha; recollections of your own virtue, your own generosity, to give yourself a sense of self-worth; recollection of death, to remind yourself that you can't be heedless. In a lot of these cases, the purpose is to fend off issues in the mind that are preventing you from getting with the breath. You engage in them so that you can then get back to it.

I've had a number of people recently complain: Once the mind settles down with the breath, what do you do next? Well, you stay there—and learn that this is a skill that needs to be developed. All too often we think, "Well, I've got a little bit of stillness and now I can go for insight." But the insight doesn't come any place else but in your efforts to keep the mind solidly based, to keep it still. Look for any little disturbance that's going to come. Whether it comes tonight or tomorrow, whenever it comes, you've got to be ready for it, which means you have to be still but alert as consistently as possible.

It's like going out and capturing animals for zoo. You go to a place where the animals tend to be and you wait. You may ask yourself, "How long do I have to wait?" And the answer is: "I don't know." Who knows when the animal is going to come? Animals don't come according to a neat schedule. But you do know that they tend to come here, and if you're still and alert, the stillness won't scare them away, and the alertness will allow you to see them.

It's the same with issues in the mind. You've got to be still so that you can actually sense these things. Otherwise, it's like trying to look at your reflection in a pool of water, but you're shaking the vessel in which the water lies. The reflection isn't going to be clear—you're just going to see waves. It's like trying to listen to a subtle sound in the house when you're humming to yourself. Or it's like trying to check if a piece of cloth is dry when your own hand is wet. You've got to get your hand dry; you've got to stop humming; you've got to stop moving the water. When things are still, when things are clear inside, that's when you're going to see the subtle things in the mind.

And you don't have to know all the names for the different qualities that the Buddha taught. In a lot of cases, the Buddha taught people just the four noble truths, and that's plenty right there. And a lot of his instructions on meditation are simply variations of the duties of the four noble truths. Getting to see, as he said, a disturbance in the mind, which is another name for subtle stress, is a

beginning step in comprehending stress. If thoughts of sensuality are disturbing the mind, how do you cut them out so that you can settle down? That's abandoning the cause of stress. If the mind has settled down but it's still talking to itself about the breath, talking to itself about adjusting the breath, how do you know when to stop? A fair amount of that is necessary to get the mind together with the breath, but there are times you realize the mind is fully there—you don't have to talk about it anymore. That's when you can settle in and be One with the breath. And that reduces the level of stress in your concentration.

So this is what you want to look for: the rise and the fall in the level of stress. That's what you look for to see your mind. It's hard to focus directly on the mind. But you focus on the level of stress in your concentration, its rise and fall, and there you'll see the impact of the mind. You'll be able to gauge what state it's in by how well it's able to stay focused on other things that are close by.

So don't worry about reading or memorizing all the lists. Some of the lists are helpful to give you a sense of what may be needed at any one time, to bring things into balance. In the wings to awakening, there is a fairly complete list of what the Buddha said was necessary to know; everything else is just an elaboration of that. But as you get a better and better sense of the mind as it relates to the breath, you don't even need to know the names of those qualities. You get an intuitive sense that the mind is too active or not active enough, too sluggish, too wired. It circles around issues like these: very simple.

And the way to gauge how the mind is doing is by how well it's staying focused with the breath. When the breath grows still and your awareness fills the body, that's when you see the mind directly. But even then, you'll be focusing it on other subtler topics—space, consciousness. The mind will always need an anchor like that for you to observe it. As I said, don't worry about the names of the different qualities you need to focus on. Just try to figure out what's wrong with the mind, why it's not settling down with the breath. And once it *has* settled down with the breath, what is it in the mind that's disturbing you so can't stay with the breath totally undisturbed?

They're very simple questions, but they're related to this awareness of the body and the mind together, right here. There's nowhere else that you have to look.