

Concentration & Insight

March 10, 2017

When you're focused on the breath, you're focusing on what's called "form." The breath is one of the elements that make up your sense of the form of the body as you feel it from within. In other words, you're not concerned with how the body looks on the outside. You're concerned more with how you feel it from the inside, what's called "proprioception," or what the Buddha called "form." Basically, this sense of form is composed of four properties: There's the breath, which they also call the "wind-property"; there's warmth, the "fire-property"; coolness, the "water-property"; and solidity, the "earth-property."

All of these things are there throughout the body, but your primary experience of the body is actually the energy. So when we focus on the breath, that's where we're focused: on the sense of energy that flows through the body. Because we don't often see that as energy, it seems a little foreign to perceive it this way, but it's actually the most immediate thing you sense about the body.

So, take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where that flow of energy is most obvious. It may be at the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest, or the movement of the air through the nose. But you're primarily interested in the sense of energy, because that's what they're talking about when they talk about wind-property, or the breath. If your thoughts go outside, just gather them back into the sense of the body, the energy, right here.

We're trying to develop a sense of pleasure here, so the next step is: When you're aware of the flow of energy, ask yourself: "Does it feel good?" Feeling good is a very subjective thing: There are times when you want to be energized, times when you want to be relaxed—in other words, to bring things into balance. So ask yourself: "What kind of breathing would be right for right now?" What's the condition of your body right now? If you're tired, try to breathe in a way that's energizing. If you're tense, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxing. Or you can systematically experiment with different kinds of breathing: long *vs.* short, heavy *vs.* light, slow *vs.* fast, deep *vs.* shallow. See where along the continuum between those extremes the breath feels just right for you, right now.

Ajaan Lee borrowed an image from the Buddha: He said, "You're like a cook, fixing the breath for yourself to partake of." So notice: What breath food do you want? What do you like right now? What's needed right now for a sense of well-being, sitting here, right here?

Once you get a sense of ease with the breath, think of it spreading through the body. The Buddha's image is of a bathman: Back in those days, they didn't have soap, they had a kind of soap powder, like flour, and then you'd mix water with the powder and you'd have a ball of dough, which was what you would rub over your body. They would prepare the dough by

mixing the water with the soap flour, in the same way that you would knead water into flour to make bread.

So you can think of making a survey of your body—down through the limbs, your arms, your legs, down through the torso—and ask yourself: “Where does it feel like the energy’s not flowing well? Can I help it along? Can I knead it through the body? Can I think of relaxing things right there, opening things right there, so that the sense of the energy can flow easily, smoothly?”

Then work around the body, time and again, until you get really familiar with how the breathing energy feels in the different parts of the body, and it feels good all the way through.

That’s where you can settle in. But when you settle in, you’re not settling on the sense of pleasure: If you just focus on the pleasure and leave the breath, you’ve lost the foundation for the meditation. So, stay focused on the breath and allow the pleasure to do its work for the body: easing things, making things more pleasant. Because it’s your continued awareness of the breath that makes the sense of pleasure come and be sustained.

We develop this sense of pleasure and well-being for several reasons. This is the pleasure of form—i.e., the pleasure that comes from having the elements in the body, the properties of the body, in good balance. This gives you an alternative to sensual pleasure. As the Buddha said, this is a pleasure that’s blameless, that doesn’t involve any unskillful qualities, which is very different from sensual pleasure. Think of all the unskillful and stupid things you’ve done over sensual desires. Although sometimes you’ll hear people say you shouldn’t let yourself get stuck on concentration, being stuck on concentration is much less dangerous than being stuck on sensuality. Nobody kills over jhana, or steals, or breaks any of the precepts. So, you’re not harming anyone; you’re not developing qualities of the mind that will be harmful for you or for others.

At the same time, you’re giving the mind a sense of pleasure that actually adds to its clarity. Most sensual pleasures make the mind clouded: You get narrowly focused on one thing and block out everything else. As a result, the mind can’t see itself clearly. But when you’re centered with the breath and have your awareness spreading out through the body together with the breath energy and the pleasure coming from the breath energy, the mind gets a lot clearer: You’re more present to what’s happening and less likely to be knocked around by the good and bad things that come your way. So this is a form of pleasure that’s a lot safer.

The Buddha never says there’s anything wrong with the search for happiness, the search for pleasure. It’s simply a matter of learning how to do it with wisdom and discernment. We all want to be happy, and you’d think that we’d act in ways that would create happiness, but look at our behavior: So many times we do things that lead to stress and suffering and harm, and yet we wonder, “Why?” Well, it’s because we don’t know what we’re doing. But when the mind is centered and still like this, you can see more clearly what’s coming up in the mind—what intentions are beginning to form—and you can decide whether you want to follow them or

not.

One of the skills that come with breath meditation, especially as you get more sensitive to the breath energy in different parts of the body, is that you begin to see that different thoughts are associated with patterns of tension in different parts of the body: maybe around the face, in the neck, in your arms, your hands, feet—they can be anywhere in the body. This way, as soon as there's a stirring somewhere in the body, you realize: "Okay, a thought is beginning to form." In fact, you're actually in a position, when you're really quick, where you can catch it before it clearly is a thought. It's more of a stirring on the borderline between your awareness and the body. But all too often, the mind will simply label it as a thought and then run with it. Only after it's run with it for a while do we begin to realize that it's something good or something bad. But by that time, it's kind of late: You want to be on top of things before they happen.

Which is why, as part of the concentration practice, whenever there's a stirring in different parts of the body—a little knot of tension developing—you want to breathe right through it. You don't want to wait to see whether it's a good or bad thought or anything. You want to have your first line of defense that you can sense where the thought-potential is associated with the body. Then, if you breathe through that spot and allow the tension to relax, the thought doesn't have a place to stand. You're more on top of things.

When you've learned the skill of discharging the thought in this way, then as you go through the day and thoughts come up in the mind and you see something unskillful has formed, you can breathe right through it. This puts you more in control. Because you have more clarity, you're on top of things. Which is why this pleasure is a higher form of pleasure than the pleasure of sensuality.

When you're in the world of your sensual fantasies, your sensual plans, you're not seeing things as they're happening, as processes: You're there *in* that world and your views of things are going to be colored by the particular world, the particular desire that's forming that thought-world. Whereas if you're staying with the breath, you can stand outside those thought-worlds, and your vision isn't obscured. It isn't skewed by the desire. You can see the desire as something separate, and then you can decide: Is this a good desire? Is it a bad desire? Is it something I want to identify with? Something I don't?

You begin to get a sense that there are lots of different members of your committee here in the mind, lots of different voices, some of which you can trust, some of which you can't. Being with the breath makes you the chairman of the committee; nobody else has grabbed the gavel.

So you want to develop the skill that provides you with this alternative form of well-being, so that when you're faced with pain, you don't have to go running to sensual pleasure: You can go to the breath. When unskillful mind states come up, and you know if you act on them there's going to be trouble, you can go to the breath. Use the breath to undermine those mind states, to give you an alternative sense of pleasure, right here, right now.

We talked earlier about how a lot of us in our culture now have problems with delayed gratification. But one of the best ways of learning how to delay gratification is to give you something good to be with here in the present moment, so that you're not totally starved, and the gratification you're waiting for is not all waiting way down the line. You've got something right here, right now, that feels good, feels nourishing. So you've got this alternative. And the greater skill you can develop in knowing how to focus here, get in touch with this—quickly, thoroughly, and for extended periods of time—the more you change the balance of power in the mind, so that the thirst for sensual pleasure doesn't take over. You're feeding the mind with a different kind of pleasure—a pleasure that, as I said, has no blameworthy qualities and is actually helping with the clarity of the mind.

This *is* a state of becoming, but it's a state of becoming that's really clear, that enables you to see other states of becoming as they arise. Which is why the Buddha said, insight comes from concentration, by which he meant that you need some insight into the workings of the mind to get into concentration. That insight is basically a value judgment. You can decide whether the kind of pleasure that can come from concentration would be better than the pleasure that you gain from your sensual desires. And as the mind settles down, gets more solid, you're in a better position to make even subtler judgments on subtler issues as they arise. So as the Buddha said, without insight there's no concentration; and without concentration there's no insight.

The two qualities go together. The concentration gives you the grounding, a sense of well-being, so that when you start looking into the mind's unskillful ways, you don't feel threatened. Because a lot of insight will be just that, seeing how you've behaved in foolish ways. As Ajaan Chah once said, "Watching your mind is a matter of watching the mind lie to itself." You have to learn how to see through the lies. It's unpleasant to see how the mind has been tricking itself, sometimes it can be disheartening, but when you're coming at it from this point of view—standing on a solid, balanced, stable state of mind—you don't find it all that threatening. You find it enlightening. Liberating. You're no longer a slave to your old ways.

This is what I mean when I say that you're changing the balance of power inside so that the most skillful intentions of the mind, the most skillful voices in the mind, get placed more and more in charge—and everybody benefits as a result. So, however much effort it takes to get the mind to be willing to settle down with the breath, how many battles you have to fight as you find the mind slipping off, coming back, slipping off, coming back—the effort is all worth it. Because as you finally gain mastery in this skill, you find that it helps you become skillful in all sorts of other areas of your life as well.