

Everything Comes Together Right Here

August 26, 2020

Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Where do you feel the breath? Try to be with that sensation and with nothing else. Ride the sensation all the way in, all the way out. If you're going to do any thinking, think about the breath. Think about that sensation. We're trying to get the breath in and of itself.

Which means that we're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts about the world outside, just put them aside right now. They don't belong here. You just want that sensation. Thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of anger, thoughts of whatever: Think of them as being like clouds. They can come by and they can go away. They don't have to have much substance.

We're the ones who give them substance. We turn them into worlds—what the Buddha calls becoming. If you get into a becoming like that, you've gone astray. When we're working on the concentration, even though concentration is a state of becoming, we're focusing on the raw materials: just the breath, just your mind talking to itself about the breath. There will also be a perception you hold in mind, an image you hold in mind about the breath, and then the feeling. How does the breath feel right now? Does it feel comfortable?

The Buddha talks about perception and feeling as being mental fabrications because of the impact they have on the mind. But they also have an impact on the breath. The way you picture the breath to yourself will have an impact on how it feels and where the sensations are that you notice.

Since developing a heart condition, I've discovered that the breath sensations in the area around the heart can be very complex. They're like a maze. As you breathe in, some of the breath sensations inside the heart seem to be going up, others seem to be going down. You want to make sure you don't get in their way.

Now, you may notice that or you may notice other things in your sensation of the breath in the body right now. You may find other areas in the body that are complex for you. The important thing is that you're really sensitive to what's going on: sensitive to what feels good, and also sensitive to how your perceptions might be getting in the way of its feeling even better.

This is why Ajaan Fuang said that when you meditate, you're playing. You play with your sensations. You play with your perceptions. In other words, you try different things out. One of the instructions he often used was, "Use your imagination." Another was, "Be observant."

If, as you breathe in, there parts of the body where the breath energy seems to go up and running against something, well, think of it going down. Maybe it shouldn't be going up. Maybe your perception is forcing it up.

So as you see, even though you're with the sensation of breathing, other things are going on as well. You're thinking about the breath, you're experimenting, you're evaluating things, but it's all gathered around this one sensation. And that's what matters.

The word the Buddha uses for a concentrated mind—*ekagga* or *ekaggatā*—means basically having one gathering spot. There are different activities going around in the mind, but they're all gathered around here.

Look at his list of the factors of the first jhana: singleness of preoccupation, directed thought, evaluation, pleasure, rapture. Five things, but what keeps them from being five, what makes them one, is the fact they're all gathered around the one object, the singleness of preoccupation. The other factors are there at that spot, helping things along.

You might be saying to yourself, "I thought we were talking about mindfulness, and now we're talking about jhana." The Buddha doesn't make a clear distinction between the two. In the description of the first jhana, he says, you're secluded from sensuality and from unskillful thoughts.

Well, think about that passage where the Buddha's talking about mindfulness, comparing it to the quail that wanders away from its field and gets caught by the hawk. As it's being carried off, it laments, "Oh, my lack of merit! If only I'd stayed in my ancestral territory, my ancestral range, this hawk would have been no match for me." The hawk gets a little peeved—here's this little pipsqueak of a quail bragging. So he lets him go and says, "Okay go to your ancestral territory, but you won't escape me there." So the quail flies down. His ancestral territory is a field that's been newly plowed, with the stones turned up. He stands on one of the stones and he starts taunting the hawk, "Come get me you hawk! Come get me you hawk!" The hawk swoops down, and when the quail see that it's coming at full speed, it hides behind the stone, and the hawk shatters its breast on the stone. As the Buddha said, the field, there, stands for the four establishing of mindfulness; the area outside of the field stands for thoughts of sensuality.

All too often, we hear that mindfulness is a matter of just letting the mind go wherever it's going to go. You simply keep track of where it's wandering. You don't place any restrictions on it. You're totally accepting of whatever comes up. But here the Buddha's saying No. When mindfulness is really established properly, it stays within its field. It doesn't go out wandering in thoughts of sensuality. And that's part of the definition of the first jhāna: You're secluded from thoughts of sensuality. So the establishing of mindfulness and the first jhāna overlap.

There's another passage where the Buddha's describing the stages of the practice. It's a standard list of the stages, except for one deviation. Where ordinarily the Buddha would be talking about the first jhana, he talks about the four establishings of mindfulness instead. He says, for example, that you stay focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Then, when you can do that, the Buddha says to stay focused on the body in and of itself, but don't think any discursive

thoughts related to the body, or feelings, or mind, or mind-states. And from putting aside discursive thinking, you go into the second jhana.

So he's basically saying that when you establish mindfulness, it's equivalent to the first jhana.

Ajaan Lee likes to talk about how evaluation is related to ardency and alertness, and mindfulness is a form of directed thought. In other words, the three qualities that accompany the practice of right mindfulness get turned into factors of jhana. So it's one smooth, seamless practice.

It's not as if you do mindfulness practice and then you stop doing mindfulness practice and start doing concentration. As you're doing mindfulness right, the mind gets into right concentration. So you stay right here. It's simply that you get more solidly right here, more sensitive right here.

As you've been working with the breath right here, you get a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, as you allow the breath energies go whatever directions they want. Ajaan Lee says that sometimes they like to spin around in place, sometimes they go up, sometimes they go down. Well, keep those options in mind as possibilities, so that your cartoon ideas of how the breath works don't get in the way of making it really nice. And as you get more and more sensitive to what's going on, that factor of evaluation that turns into discernment.

Here again, in these Zoom meetings that I lead sometimes, every now and then we get someone who comes from a very different tradition moving in. And they like to talk about how when you do concentration practice, you then drop the concentration and you do insight." But again, there's no clear line drawn between the two.

What is insight? Basically doing concentration with a lot of sensitivity. The Buddha calls it having your theme well in hand. The image he gives is of a person sitting looking at someone lying down, or a person standing looking at someone who's sitting. They're right next to each other, but one is a little bit above, watching what's going on.

As you start getting more and more sensitive to your concentration, you begin to see: oh, there are aggregates there; there are different fabrications. They're all there: all the things you're going to need for insight. They're right there. You don't need to go anyplace else.

So you've got mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, all in one convenient location. And just that thought should help get you even more focused. You don't have to say, "Well, I'm going to do mindfulness for a while." And then, "Gee, when do I switch to concentration?" And then, "When do I switch to insight?" Those aren't decisions you have to make. Everything comes together right here.

It's just a question of being more and more sensitive right here—and allowing your imagination to expand right here, as to what's possible.