

One Thing at a Time

June 27, 2021

If you want to do something well, you have to do one thing at a time. We live in a society of multitasking: people doing three, four, five things all at once, and claiming they can do them just as well as if they did them one at a time. But that's like asking a people with brain injury how their brain is. As far as they're concerned, their brain is functioning perfectly fine. But because the brain has its limitations when it's been injured like that, it can't really be a good judge of itself. In the same way, when you ask people who are multitasking if they're doing their jobs well, you're asking people who can't really judge well. To judge if something is done well, you have to watch it from the very beginning to the very end with your undivided attention.

So, as we're sitting here right now, let this talk be in the background. It's here to serve as a fence, so that when your attention leaves the breath, you run into the talk. The talk is there to remind you, "Go back to the breath."

It's also there to give you some ideas of what to do when you go back. We're not simply here watching whatever happens with the breath. When the Buddha gave meditation instructions, he said that you *train* yourself to breathe in certain ways.

In the beginning, you simply learn how to discern: What are the distinctions between long breathing and short breathing? And, Ajaan Lee would add, you can also try to discern fast, slow; heavy, light; deep, shallow; or in long, out short; in short, out long, to get a sense of what the breath can do for the body.

When you have a sense of what kind of breathing feels good, that helps you with one of the steps: breathing in and out sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. The rapture and pleasure don't happen on their own. You have to give rise to them, and you do that partly by the way you breathe and also by the way you perceive the breath. When you breathe in, what's the image of the breath that you have in mind? Some people talk of the breath as if it were a tactile sensation—in other words, simply the touch of the air moving through the nose, over the lip—but the Buddha doesn't talk about it in those terms. He talks about it as one of the properties of the body itself: the breath energy inside the body, which originates in the body. It's because of the breath energy in the body that the air can flow in and out to begin with, so this is the energy you want to focus on.

That leads to the next step: to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body. Think of the whole body breathing—from the top of the head down to the tips of

the toes, from the front to the back, the back into the front. Think of the whole body breathing together.

Then look at what the mind needs. Does it need to be energized? Okay, breathe in a way that gives you more energy. Does it need to be calmed down? Breathe in a way that's more relaxing.

You're taking care of three things here all at once: breath, feelings, and the mind. You want to bring them together so that they form a good whole: breath filling the body, a feeling of pleasure filling the body, your awareness filling the body.

You don't have to pay attention to anything else right now. The sound of the plane going overhead: Just let it go right through. It's really none of your business. Your business is to get to know your breath and to get to know your mind.

You want to know the breath because it's your anchor, and it's also a mirror for the mind. Because ultimately this is what the meditation comes down to: We're focusing in on the mind.

As the Buddha said, the mind is what creates the problem of suffering to begin with. You can think of all the things in the world that you might be suffering from —what other people have done, what other people have said—but the Buddha says that those are not the real cause of suffering. The real cause lies inside.

Even before we see sights, hear sounds, smell aromas, taste flavors, or touch tactile sensations with the body, there's activity going on in the mind. If we're ignorant about that activity, then no matter what we see or hear, it's going to lead to suffering. If we know what we're doing as we come to these things, then it all becomes part of the path.

The Buddha focuses attention on two things—what he calls fabrication, *sankhara*; and intention, *cetana*—and these things come first. Yet we don't realize that fact, which is why we suffer.

So as we come to meditate, we're trying to get more alert to these activities in the mind. If you really want to know your intentions, you set one intention up—say, "I'm going to stay right here"—and then all of a sudden you see other intentions coming in, which you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. You just would have gone along, drifting along with them.

It's like a boat in a river: Different currents come from the left, different currents come from the right, and you're not really aware of them because you simply follow them. Whichever one is strongest, you go with it.

But here you're trying to set up one intention and make it yours. It's your anchor to resist the currents. As for any other intention that comes in right now, tell yourself: That's not yours.

To get to know fabrication, the Buddha says, know that there are three kinds: The in-and-out breathing is a kind of fabrication to begin with, because it's influenced by your intentions. Then there's what he calls directed thought and evaluation, *vitakka vicara*, which is how you talk to yourself. So, here with the breath, talk to yourself in a way that's encouraging, that helps you to stay. Finally, there are perceptions and feelings. You're trying to create a feeling of ease, and you hold in mind whatever picture of the breath in the body is helpful for getting you to settle down with that sense of ease.

You can think of the body as being like a big sponge: As you breathe in, the breath is coming in from all directions—through every pore of the skin.

Or you can remind yourself that, even though the air may be coming in through the nose, the breath originates in the body. So where in the body does the breath energy start? Is it down around the navel? In the middle of the chest? In the middle of the head? Where, when you focus on it, does it seem that the breath is coming from there and it's allowed to spread and feel good?

Or you can think of every cell in the body breathing. They all have equal weight, and you give them all the same amount of attention. You don't spotlight some and throw others into the dark; you try to be aware of every cell in the body breathing in, breathing out, everybody together, and see if that perception is calming. You're trying to calm the mind, calm the breath, but at the same time having energy and being alert.

Use the breath to bring things into balance. Sometimes the mind is wilted, lacking energy. What kind of breathing would give you more energy? Sometimes it's too frenetic, jumping around here and there. What kind of breathing would calm it down? What kinds of perceptions would calm it down?

As you explore these issues, you begin to realize that there are a lot of interesting potentials here. You see how the state of the mind depends on the breathing, and how the breathing depends on the state of the mind. Again, everything gets brought back to the mind. It's simply a matter of learning how to use the acts of the mind and the results of those acts to train the mind higher and higher.

This goes to show that even this one thing—the breath, as you focus on it—has lots of implications, lots of lessons to teach. It's simply a matter of learning how to look at it the right way—asking the right questions.

There was once a senior monk from Bangkok who came to see Ajahn Mun in the forest. This was someone who had had a tendency to look down on the forest monks, thinking, "What do these forest monks know? They don't get to hear Dhamma talks every day like I do. They haven't studied the books like I do."

So he said to Ajaan Mun, “When I’m in Bangkok, even though there are many wise people all around the city, still I often run into problems in the Dhamma that I can’t solve—I can’t solve for myself; they can’t solve them for me. What do you do out here in the forest? Where do you go to listen to the Dhamma?”

Ajaan Mun’s response was, “I hear the Dhamma seven days a week, 24 hours a day, except when I’m asleep. A leaf falls from a tree and it teaches inconstancy. The crows caw: It’s because of stress, because of suffering.

The senior monk was taken aback, and he said, “Well, that shows that you know how to listen.”

So how *do* you listen? You keep the Buddha’s teachings on the four noble truths in mind. What is the stress? The stress is in the clinging. Where does it come from? It comes from our own craving. Can that craving be stopped? Yes. How do you do it? Through the noble eightfold path. That’s the framework you bring to every question.

You can listen to crows cawing from other points of view, from other perspectives, and you’ll get different lessons. But if you’re looking for the stress in things, looking for reasons to let go of your attachments, then you hear them in a different way. You realize you can’t simply just tell yourself, “Let go.” You have to let go through understanding, which is why we focus on one thing at a time.

Focus on the breath, and the issues of feelings and issues of the mind will gather right there where you can see them all together clearly. They all become one big issue. And you realize that the solution to that issue is in the mind.

So that’s where these lessons keep pointing us: What is your mind doing right now? Is it skillful? Is it leading to suffering? Or is it leading to the end of suffering? If it’s leading to suffering, what can you change? If you listen for answers to those questions, you’re going to hear them, because—as all the ajaans say—everything is teaching us. The question simply is: Are we willing to learn the lessons? Or do we have other lessons in mind?

The more you get to know your breath, and the more you get to know your mind, then the more you begin to see that the Buddha was right: The big issue in life is the suffering we’re causing ourselves. It’s unnecessary, and we can put an end to it. And where do you look to learn that lesson? You look right here.