

Your Breath, Your Territory

September 24, 2021

We live in the same world, but we live in different worlds. Each of us sitting here right now, in the same room. We see many of the same things, but we see them from different angles. And there's a part of our awareness within each of us that we don't share with anyone else.

You probably remember the time when you were a child, when the thought first occurred to you: When other people see colors, do they see the same colors you do? We have the same names for certain things, you point to something and say, "This is green," and we agree it's green. But is your green the same thing as my green? There's no way we can now. We shrug that off as a strange fact and go on with our lives.

But it turns out that the big problem in life, our suffering, is also in that same area, and you can't shrug that off. You go to a doctor, and the doctor can't see how much pain you're in. He or she can guess. They ask, "How would you rank your pain the scale of 1 to 10?"—which is pretty useless. How does your one compared to other people's one, all the way up to ten? Yet this is the big issue in life: our pain, our suffering. This is the big problem.

This is why when we meditate, we're focusing on this area of our awareness, the awareness that's inside. We have to take responsibility for it, because no one else can take responsibility for us. We get recommendations from the Buddha on what to do from within, but we're the ones that have to do the doing. He says to contemplate, keeping track of the body in and of itself—in other words the body as you feel it from within—ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Anything that refers to anything outside of the body, any other contacts, you put it aside right now. Stay with just the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself.

This is something else no one else can know. They can hear you breathe, they can watch you breathe, but how your breath feels from within, that's something nobody else can know. But you can use it. You can change the way you breathe, change the way you feel it, think of the breath going in different ways. And it responds. Sometimes it responds more quickly than other times, but the breath does respond.

Take advantage of that. You can use it to create a sense of well-being inside. Then you gain a sense of the other elements of the body, too: the warmth of fire, the coolness of water, the solidity of earth. Again, these aren't tactile sensations,

they're proprioception, the way your body feels from within. You're trying to anchor yourself here, at the body as you feel it from within, so that you get a sense of your *mind* from within. You learn how to observe the mind so that you're not simply in the thoughts that come to the mind. You can step out of them a little bit and see the thoughts as processes. It's one of the reasons why we focus on the body. It gives you a place to stay so that you can do this sort of work.

Now, to stay here, you want to feel at home, in the same way as moving into a house. You want to put up some artwork, you want to bring in some furniture you like. Arrange things so that it's a good place to stay, and turns it into a home where you can settle down.

Here you do that with the different elements, first and foremost the breath, because it's the most responsive of the elements. As you settle in here and watch it, one of the first things you notice is that if there's a pain in the body, how you envision the way the breath energy relates to the pain has an effect on how you experience the pain. The problem is you may not notice it, so the Buddha has you focus here. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, a sense of fullness.

Ajaan Lee gives some added instructions to fill in the blanks. If you notice that as you're trying to spread the sense of well-being through the body, you run into a pain, think of the comfortable breath energy going through the pain. Don't let it be blocked. Don't let it stop there. Don't think of the pain as a wall. Don't think of it as a dead area where the breath can't penetrate. The breath *can*. The fact that you're feeling something there means that there's already breath energy, but it may be stifled, it may be bottled up, stagnant.

So think of what you can do to bring it more to life so that the breath flows comfortably through it. If there's a pain in the body, you can ask yourself: Which direction is breath coming into the pain from? If you have a pain in the leg, is it coming up from the foot? Or down from the thigh? Or if you have a pain in your back, how does the breath energy relate to that? Is it coming down the spine and going through it? Is it coming up from the legs? Which way of visualizing the breath to yourself is most effective in treating the pain? One of the advantages of working with the breath is that it can change the way you feel pains in the body so that you can settle in here and feel at home, ready to do the work with the mind.

Of course, as you're dealing with pains like this in the body, you're already dealing with the mind: its perceptions of the pain, its way of talking to itself about the pain. It's simply a matter of change of focus. You're with the breath, with the body, but you're also noticing how the mind relates to them—both as an active principal, with its perceptions, and then as a passive one, simply being aware of

what's going on. This is the big instigator in this area of reality, your area that you don't share with anyone else.

The Buddha said the mind is the forerunner of all things. So how is it shaping things? Is it doing a good job? Bring some awareness to the process. And take advantage of what you can learn about this area of your awareness while you're still strong enough, while you're still alert enough, while you can still hear and see, so that you can take in messages and Dhamma lessons from outside. It's not always going to be the case that you can communicate with the world outside. I have a couple students who are getting deaf as they get older. Communication gets garbled really easily. Fortunately, they still have enough hearing so that they can check if something doesn't seem right, but then something may seem right to them and yet still be totally wrong. And there may come a point where they can't check anymore.

If this could happen to other people, it could happen to you. When the Buddha's talking about being mindful of bodies externally, this is one of things he wants you to think about: Having a human body is a precarious proposition. Its inner workings are very complicated and they're so quickly amenable to malfunctioning.

So while you've got them functioning, learn to create a space inside where the mind can talk to itself, the mind can reason with itself, the mind can understand itself.

I heard an unexpected story the other day. It turns out that back when Nixon was president, he went to Thailand and had an audience with the king. As he reported later, one of the questions he liked to ask the different heads of state he visited was: What would you like from America? And the king gave an answer he didn't expect. He didn't ask for economic or military aid. He said, "Understanding." That's what we're here for: We're here to understand, because understanding makes a huge difference. That's part of the power of the mind. If you can understand how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself, then you can learn how to stop.

So as you're dealing with yourself inside of this area of your territory, you can deal with it in a way that no matter what's happening outside or how much you're able to communicate outside, you've still got something of value inside, where you're dealing with your thoughts, you're dealing with your physical sensations in a way that's not creating any suffering. That's the skill we're working on here. It's in this area right here. This is why the Buddha, when he posed the question, "What is one?" never said that we are all one. He said something else entirely: All beings subsist on food. Because after all, we are not one. There are areas in our

environment that we share, that we're all dependent on, but there is a conflict there. Different people have different desires out of the environment, and sometimes conflict pretty easily, because we can't all eat the same thing. If you eat it, I can't. If I eat it, you can't. That's how the fact of feeding shows that we're not one.

But if you focus on the area inside, you don't have to conflict with anybody. No one is going to move into your territory. No one can evict you and take over your place—except for the fact that the body will evict you from the body at some point. Otherwise, you're in this world wherever it goes. It's your territory. So you want to make sure that it's in order, and it's not creating a lot of suffering for itself. It's in a world that has lots of potentials for suffering, but also potentials for happiness. It's in this inner world where the Buddha talks about touching deathless with the body. This is what he means: The deathless is something that will appear in your inner world. There's that possibility, too, right here.

So try to stay as grounded as you can right here, as sensitive as you can—sensitive not only in sense of sensing what's going on, but also in the sense of understanding. When something happens, if there's any pain, any suffering: Why? What can be done about it?

It's amazing that the Buddha focused on this as the big issue of his teaching. Of course, that's because he saw this is the area where the teaching was most needed. Not only is this a sign of the Buddha's great understanding, but also of his compassion. The problem of suffering is right in here. It's nowhere else. Other people have their suffering, but you can't sense their suffering, you don't have to suffer from it. You can suffer vicariously, but the real suffering is what you experience from within. But he saw that there were common patterns even though everyone's in his or her own world. So it was possible to teach people. He saw that suffering was the big problem that weighs down on the hearts of all beings and he made that the focus of his Dhamma. He had found what works, and he wanted to share it with us. So it's up to us to open our hearts and bring it in—to where the work needs to be done.