

Wearing the Breath

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We often say to watch the breath, but that may be an unfortunate choice of words. Subconsciously, you think your eyes are somehow involved. And, because your eyes are in your head, *you're* up in your head watching the breath in another part of the body, but that's not the effect we're trying to get.

We're trying to fill the body with a sense of awareness and a sense of ease. Think of the first three frames of reference for establishing mindfulness—body, feelings, mind. What you're trying to do as you meditate is to get all of them to fill one another. The mind fills the body, a feeling of ease fills the body, and the breath is the glue that makes that happen. So, instead of watching the breath, think of yourself being bathed in the breath or wearing the breath. It's all around you.

When the Buddha describes the breath, he describes it as one of the aspects of the wind property in the body, which means it's an aspect of form. It's not the tactile sensation of the air at the nose or going over your lip. It's something already there in the body.

So, ask yourself: Where do you feel the flow as the air comes in, the air goes out? Where do you feel the flow of energy in the body right now? Where is it most prominent? Focus your attention there and try to figure out which ways of breathing feel best.

Again, you're feeling it; you're wearing it. It's what nowadays we call proprioception: your sense of the body as you feel it from within. The reason why we want to get our awareness all-around is because when thoughts come into the mind, the fact that they're able to stay for a while means that there has to be a little bit of tension someplace in the body to hold them, like a little marker, and those patterns of tension can be anywhere.

So, if you're focused at one point—say, the tip of the nose—and you're trying to block out everything else, then you're going to miss where those patterns of tension are. You're going to miss an important step in the meditation, which is to see thoughts as they arise and catch them when they're still in the process of forming.

At that point, they haven't turned into *becomings* yet. A becoming is a world in the mind. You have a desire, and then a world forms around it. Where is that desired object located? And where are you in relationship to that world? Once your thought has gotten to that point, you're *in* the thought; you're out of your body. Then it can take you anywhere.

But there are stages leading up to that. In fact, the Buddha said, seeing the stages leading up to that is the way of getting round the dilemma of the fact that suffering is caused by the kinds of craving that lead to becoming. One of the kinds of craving that leads to becoming is craving for becoming itself, while another one is craving for non-becoming. In other words, you have an identity in a world and you want to snuff it out.

That's the dilemma: We're trying to put an end to becoming, but if you sit there thinking about putting an end to becoming that's already happened, it's going to create more becoming. What you've got to do is see the processes leading up to the fact of becoming and the processes that keep it in place, and develop some dispassion for them.

The best way to do that is to be in on the formation of a thought at the very early stages, when it's still just a beginning desire—and ideally even before it becomes a desire for anything in particular. It's just a desire for something else. There's a stirring of the breath someplace in the body, and then you identify it as a desire for this, a desire for that, a thought about this, a thought about that—and then you go with it. You want to catch it at that stage, before you've slapped on that perception.

So, we stay with the breath as much as we can. Try to settle in. Feel as if you're sitting here surrounded by breath, and your awareness surrounds you, too.

In addition to having that subconscious idea that we're watching the breath with our eyes when we're in our head, we also have the subconscious idea that we're facing forward. When you close your eyes, which direction is the mind facing? It doesn't have to face anywhere. It can be centered and then spread out in all directions. That's the quality you're trying to develop.

As the Buddha said, you want the upper part of your body to feel like the lower part of the body, and vice versa. In other words, up and down, front and back: You want them to be all equal, so that wherever there is that stirring in the mind, that stirring in the body, you're going to see it.

It's like watching a play. If you're just focused on one point, it's like being in the audience. Between scenes, they're going to lower the curtain to change the scenery. Once the scenery's in place, they raise the curtain again, and you're in the world of that particular scene.

As for the actors who are not involved in that scene, they're behind the scenes. You don't see them when you're in the audience, so you don't see the full production. Ideally, you want to be behind the scenes. You don't want there to be a curtain when they're moving the scenery; you want to see them move the scenery around. When the actors are getting ready to come on stage, you want to

see them in the process of psyching themselves up to get on stage. That's when you really understand the production. Because we're trying to understand the production of our thoughts.

After all, where is the source of suffering? The Buddha calls it the origination of suffering. When he uses the word *origination*, one, it means looking for the cause and, two, looking for the cause in the mind. So, we're trying to understand our own minds. If you can understand your own mind, then you don't have to suffer. That's the simple principle, but working out that simple principle will require a lot of all-around awareness.

So, try to fully inhabit the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, so that your knowledge of the breath energy in the foot is in the feet; your knowledge of the breath energy in the torso is in the torso. You're not trying to pull it all up into the head.

Now, there will be a center. But it's good to have the center lower than the head. If it's up in the head, sometimes it aggravates the fact that the nerves in the head tend to be overworked in our culture. So, you want to familiarize yourself with what's going on in the body—all the parts of the body.

This is why, when we give guided meditations, we take people through the body section by section—know the navel in the navel, know the chest in the chest, the hands in the hands, the feet in the feet. Open up to the awareness that's already there and see the energy already there. It may feel very still in some parts of the body, but that's okay. As long as it doesn't feel tight and blocked, it becomes a good place to settle in.

Once your awareness is enlarged like this, you're more and more firmly established in the present moment. Your concentration is the kind of concentration that can actually look at other things and not lose its center, not lose its foundation. If your concentration is one-pointed, then when you change the point, you've changed your concentration. But when your awareness is all-around like this, then thoughts can come into the framework, you can see them come in, you can see them go. You can begin to see the stages, and your concentration is not overturned by that.

It's in this way that concentration leads to discernment, so that you can do concentration work and discernment work at the same time. In that way, your discernment is guaranteed not to turn into thought worlds or speculation worlds. It's a discernment that sees the processes as they're happening, step by step, right here, right now, without losing this frame of reference. As long as it's based in this frame of reference—the body as you experience it in the present—you're more

and more likely to see things as processes rather than getting into worlds and going with them. That helps to liberate you from a lot of unskillful thinking.

It's in that way that you perform the duties of the noble truths: seeing clinging as clinging—in other words, a step before becoming; seeing craving as craving, steps before becoming. That's when you can do something about the problem of suffering. When you've slipped into a becoming, it's too late. So, you want to be here, grounded, seeing things as processes. That's when you're sitting at the right place, at the right time, looking at the right things.