

Issues of Control

November 14, 2022

We have the chant on the brahmaviharas—particularly the chant on goodwill—to make the mind expansive. It's good to think goodwill for all beings several times a day, like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who said he liked to think about two or three impossible things before breakfast every morning to open up his mind.

We open up our minds as we think of all beings and then we try to bring that same expansive attitude to the breath. All too often, we talk about paying attention to the breath. We say, "Focus on the breath," and we instinctively tense up around whatever we're focused on. That makes it uncomfortable.

So instead, think of the breath bathing your body. It's on all sides—it's in the front, it's behind, it's to the left, to the right. You're sitting in the middle, surrounded by comfortable breathing. And listen to the body. This is an important aspect of trying to bring some control to the breath—you listen to it first.

What feels good? Would deep breathing feel good? You can try it for a while. How about shallow breathing? Try that for a while. Fast, slow, heavy, light—experiment and listen.

The Buddha once said that the Dhamma is nourished through commitment and reflection. Commitment means that you really give yourself to it, but then you have to reflect on the results of your commitment. This is an important part of developing any skill.

All too often, we're impatient. We try to barge right in, bring some control, the body reacts in a negative way, and then we decide that control must be bad. Think about that image the Buddha had about the difference between the right path and the wrong path. He compared it to different ways of trying to get milk out of a cow.

If you try twisting the horn, you're not going to get any milk, and the cow won't like it. You try twisting harder and harder and harder, and you still don't get any milk. But then you relax. You stop twisting the cow's horn. You feel a lot better, and so you decide, "Okay, effort is bad, control is bad. It'd be better not to make any effort at all, to find peace in relaxation." The problem is that you still don't get any milk, even though the cow does have milk to give.

In the same way, as we deal with our aggregates—form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness—there are unskillful ways of trying to control them and there are skillful ways. You can actually turn them into the path.

All five aggregates, for instance, are involved in concentration. Form, of course, would be the breath. Think of the breath going through the whole body. Feeling would be the sense of ease you're trying to develop. Perceptions would be the images you hold in mind about where the breath is running in the body. Thought fabrications try to adjust things and observe. The Buddha calls it directed thought and evaluation. You bring your thoughts to the breath, you notice how it's going, you try different ways of breathing, and then you decide which ones feel best. Then consciousness is aware of all these things.

So there they are: all five aggregates. If you cling to them in the wrong way, they're going to cause suffering. If you cling to them the right way, they become part of the path, because the nature of the aggregates is that there are some aspects to them you can control, and some you can't.

You're dealing with things coming in from your past karma. These are the potentials you can try to develop here in the present moment. But past karma doesn't cover everything. You're also making some choices right now. As the Buddha says, you fabricate these potentials for form, feeling, etc., for the sake of something, and then you have the actual experience of the aggregates. So there's already an intentional element in the aggregates. It's just that we tend to be ignorant of this. As we meditate, we try to become more conscious of what we're actually contributing here in the present moment and how we can change that contribution to something positive.

Now, sometimes the aggregates resist. After all, the potentials come from our past karma, and some of our past karma is bad. We have to deal with some negative things that resist going the way we want in the present moment. But we're not going to find that out unless we try to make some changes, to see what responds and what doesn't. If we couldn't make these changes, then there would be no path.

As the Buddha said, if people couldn't change their behavior, there would have been no reason for him to teach. Actually, there would have been nothing to teach to begin with. But it's because people can abandon unskillful habits that they can stop twisting the cow's horn and develop skillful habits. They can actually pull the udder and get the milk. That's why it was worthwhile for him to teach.

It's also worthwhile for us to practice. There is a tendency sometimes to say, "Well, I've tried to control things and it just doesn't go well. Maybe I should give up." But actually the aggregates have some room in them for you to make a difference. You're not going to find out about it unless you try. What you need is a willingness to try things out. If they don't work out,

try things out in different way, and if that doesn't work out, try things out in a different way.

Think of the Buddha's determination when he was still a young prince to find the way at the awakening. He tried many different paths. When he found the path that he was on wasn't working, he'd try something else. When that wasn't working, he'd try something else. He kept at it. Well, it's good to have the same determination in our own practice.

Try to notice what works, what doesn't work. When things are not working, well, what can you change? After all, we're here to put an end to our suffering, and if you just give up, you're basically saying, "I'll content myself with what someone once called the third and a half noble truth, which is where you don't try to bring suffering to an end, but you try to manage it." But the Buddha was not the kind of person to content himself with that approach, and we shouldn't content ourselves either, when the end of suffering is possible.

So, be willing to engage in trial and error for a while, but always be observant. What matters is your willingness to listen—you stop, look and listen, and you learn. Try something out. If it doesn't work, well, try something else. As for the ability to listen well, think about listening to another person. If you just barge in with your ideas about how that other person should be, they begin to shut up. They don't share things with you because you're pushing them too hard. But if you're willing to listen, they open up, and then you can understand them better.

It's the same way with the breath. Ask the body, "What would feel good right now? Where would it feel good for the breath to come in?" This is where it's good to expand your imagination. We have certain cartoon ideas of what we should feel as the breath comes in and *where* it comes in, which muscles in the body will be doing the work. When we sit here, very consciously focusing on the breath, we're focusing through the lens of that cartoon idea. And we can get ourselves pretty tired.

So use your imagination: What else could the breath do? Ajaan Lee has you think about the breath coming in and out of the body in different spots. Give that a try. Just hold in mind the thought that wherever there's pain or tension, the breath is coming in right there and dissolving that tension away. Hold that picture in mind and see how the body responds.

Or maybe focusing right at that spot is not going to help. So ask yourself, "What other spot is connected to that?" Years back, when I was young, I had migraines and found out that a lot of the migraines were associated with tension in the lower back. So I'd focus on the breath coming in and out through the lower back, and that would help. It relieved the pains in my head.

When I had malaria, I found that my breathing got labored because the parasites were shredding up my red blood cells. Oxygen wasn't getting to the muscles that were doing all the work of breathing, and the image I had in mind of where the breath had to come in was causing certain muscles to do all the work while other muscles were just freeloading. So I thought of the breath coming in through the middle of the forehead, down from the crown of the head, in from the back of the neck. I just held that image in mind, and different muscles started to do the work, while the workhorse muscles were able to relax.

So make use of the power of perception. That will shape some of the intentions you bring as you're trying to take the potentials of the aggregates and turn them into a state of concentration. Because otherwise, what do we do? We take the aggregates and we cling to them in a way that turns them into suffering. We don't like them and we try to throw them away. Well, that doesn't work—we keep coming back to them.

As in that chant we had just now—the Dhamma summaries. They come from a sutta where a king is quizzing a monk on why he ordained, and the monk explains. His explanation, basically, comes down to the facts of aging, illness, and death; inconstancy, stress, and not-self. The king admits that all these things are true, but then, at the very end, the monk asks him, "Suppose someone were to come from the east and say there's a wealthy kingdom to the east that you could conquer. Would you go for it?" Here, the king is 80 years old, has been made to reflect on his own weakness that comes from aging, the fact that illness is beyond his control, and the fact that when he dies, whatever he has, he's going to have to give it all up. He's been thinking about these things, yet when he's asked if he'd wage war to gain more wealth, immediately he says, "Yes, of course." That's the meaning of the last Dhamma summary, that the world is insatiable, it's a slave to craving.

If you give up on trying to shape the aggregates in a skillful way, and say, "Well, I'll just be done with them, let go of them," but if you haven't really completed the path, you can't get out—so you come right back. Just like the king, who was willing to come back and go for aging, illness, and death all over again.

So there are skills to develop. And it's important that we learn the patience and persistence required to develop skills. Think of a skill you've developed—in terms of music, cooking, carpentry, or any manual skill—and ask yourself, "To what extent was I able to control that? To what extent was it beyond my control?" And how did you work around the things that were beyond your control so that you could get the results you wanted?

Meditation is the same sort of thing. There is that attitude—you might call it cloning

awakening—where they say, “Well, I’ll be like an awakened person with no desires, just be receptive to whatever comes up.” To actually get there, though, requires a lot of work. You can’t clone it. But if you do the work, you learn from doing the work, and that’s how the path develops. That’s how you get genuine results. You pull the udder and the milk comes out.

So there’s a lot to learn about control as you practice. Think about Ajaan Lee’s observation that when you’re getting the mind in concentration, you’re going against the three characteristics. You’re taking this mind, which is inconstant, and you’re trying to make it constant in its focus, which means giving it a focus that it feels good about, a focus that’s expansive.

Think of hunters going through the forest. They’re looking for tracks, and they can’t just focus on one spot. They have to have what they call scatter vision, where they’re aware of the entire range of their visual field. It’s an intense focus, but broad. That’s precisely the kind of focus that feels good inside as you meditate. As you provide a focus that feels good, you’re taking things that are inconstant and stressful, and you’re turning them into something more constant, easeful. You’re taking things that are not-self and you’re learning to influence them so that they can become part of the path.

There will come a point where you realize you can take these things only so far, but it’s far enough to get into a good state of concentration. It’s far enough to become part of the path to deliver you to where you want to go.

So there’s no quick and easy answer to how much control is useful. You learn from pushing here, pushing there. Some things allow you to push them, other things will push back. But you’re not going to know which is which unless you push and notice the results you get. This is why people long ago stopped twisting cow horns to get milk, and it’s common knowledge now that you pull the udder.

In the same way, the Buddha found the path through his efforts, and he taught it, made it very clear. Now, there are people who want a one-factor path, or a two-factor path, a one-fold or a two-fold path: just awareness, or just goodwill, or just acceptance. But as the Buddha noticed, the whole path is a skill. It’s a little bit more complex than that, but it’s not so complex that we can’t master it.