Jhana & Discernment

February 21, 2025

Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and ask yourself, “Where do you feel the breathing in the body?” I know the air comes in out through the nose, into the lungs. But when the Buddha’s talking about the breath, he doesn’t talk about the air. He talks about the energy in the body itself. You have to ask yourself, “Where do you feel that flow that allows the air to come in and allows it to go out?” It could be in the chest, it could be in the abdomen, it could be anywhere in the body. Ask yourself, “Where do you feel it now?” Try to stay with that, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Make it faster, slower, shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Try to get in touch with what feels good right now. Do you want to have a sensation of the breath that feels absorbing, something you can get into and settle in with? If the breath feels constricted or tight, it’s not going to be a pleasant place to be. And you’re not going to say you can change things. The breath, the Buddha said, is a bodily fabrication. In other words, there’s an element of intention in how you breathe. You can make use of that intention to make this a good place to stay. After all, that’s what right concentration is all about. Finding a place where you can stay with a sense of ease, well-being, refreshment. Then you can let that sense of refreshment spread through the body. You can either think of it going all at once, or you can make a survey through the different parts of the body. Start, say, around the navel. Watch that part of the body for a while as you breathe in, breathe out. Notice what rhythm of breathing feels good there. And if there’s any sense of tension or tightness, there, and allow it to relax. So the normal tension builds up as you breathe in. You’re not holding on to any tension as you breathe out. Then you go up to the stomach, the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head, down the shoulders, down the back, out the legs. Go around and around in the body like this for a while. So you get a sense that whatever ease there is in the breathing can spread throughout the whole body, throughout the whole navel. And find a place in the midst of the body where it feels good to stay, where it’s easy to stay focused. And then stay right there and allow your awareness to spread through the whole body. The breathing fills the body. The awareness fills the body. Everything feels good together. This is how you get into what’s called jhana, absorption. It’s an important factor of the path. In fact, in some passages the Buddha talks about it as the heart of the path. And all the other factors are its requisites, its supports. Because it’s here that you can observe the mind clearly, both in getting it into concentration and maintaining the concentration. There’s a passage where he said, “Without jhana, no jhana, without discernment.” What he means is that if you want to get the mind into concentration, you have to be able to observe it, see what it’s doing, how it’s putting things together. Because that’s the process the Buddha wants you to study. It’s called fabrication, or sankara in Pali. And the Buddha wants you to see the extent to which the present moment is not just a given. It’s something you put together. You put it together, one, by the way you breathe. That’s called bodily fabrication. Two, verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. You choose a topic, and then you comment on it, you ask questions about it, come up with answers. You can have an internal dialogue, or more than a dialogue. A whole group discussion can go on. And as you’re getting the breath comfortable, and you’re getting the mind to settle down, there will be some talking inside. We sometimes think that with meditation you have to get the mind absolutely quiet. But there’s some thinking you have to do before it gets quiet, so you can get the mind subtly and snugly with the breath. And then finally there’s mental fabrication, which are your perceptions and your feelings. The perceptions here would be the images you hold in mind, like thinking of the breath as a quality of energy flowing through the body, rather than air coming in and out the nose. Those are two separate pictures you can have about what happens when you breathe. And you can ask yourself which one is more conducive to settling down. Another perception you can try is the question of whether the breath energy is actually coming in from the outside, or whether it starts from the inside. And if it starts from the inside, where? You can either choose one spot, two spots, or you can think of every cell in the body, breathing in, breathing out. And ask yourself which perception is most conducive to getting the mind to settle down. Which gives rise to feelings that are easy to stay with. So here, simply getting the mind to settle in with the breath, requires bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication. So you can see these things as you’re settling in. And then once the mind is there, then you can see the processes by which distractions might come up. They involve the same fabrications. Say a thought world begins to appear in your mind. There’ll be a little knot in your breath energy someplace. And the mind will start talking about that world. And there’ll be separate perceptions that come up, images in the mind, or words in the mind. And sometimes you say “no,” and sometimes you say “yes.” But for the time being, you want to say “no” to anything else besides the breath. And as you say “no,” you get better and better at detecting these things as they begin. As every meditator knows, there are times when you’re sitting here with the breath, and all of a sudden you’re someplace else, totally forgetting the breath, and in another thought world. When you realize that’s happened, you just drop the thought world and you come back. Ideally though, you want to see the earlier steps before you go into the thought world. That’s one of the reasons why you try to maintain that full body awareness. Because to go into thought world, you have to shrink. So keep your awareness expansive throughout the body. Keep the breath expansive throughout the body. It’ll be easier and easier to maintain this frame of reference. So in the process of getting the mind still, you’re also getting some understanding into it. You need the understanding to get the mind still. Once it’s still, you begin to see the process even more clearly. So there’s two factors in meditation, tranquility and insight. Insight or discernment and jhana help each other along. And there will be a strong sense of you doing this. Sometimes you hear it said that if you have any sense that you are doing the path, it’s wrong view. Well, if that were the case, then the Buddha had wrong view. Because he talks about developing a healthy sense of self around the meditation. You develop that sense of self again and again and again as you begin to understand the process and see how you do it as you go through the day in lots of different ways that can actually cause a lot of stress and suffering. Wherever there’s a desire, that’s how things get started. As the Buddha said, things don’t come out of yourself, they come out of desire. Everything he says that you’re going to experience. Whether it’s on the path or off the path, is rooted in desire. And those desires then become a nucleus around which a sense of you in a world of experience begins to develop. That’s how we were born to begin with. You were about to die. And an image came into your mind about where you might possibly go. Sometimes there are lots of options you could go to. And one of them was attractive. And the moment of death pulled you in. There you are, you in a world of experience based on a desire. Which, at the moment of death, can be pretty random. Because when people are dying, they can be pretty desperate. They’ll go for almost anything, which is why some people go to places that are not really worth going to. But the process happens not only at the moment of death, but all the time. Again, an image appears in the mind, something that seems desirable. Then there’s a sense of you in relationship to it, and the world in which that desired object exists. And you can play three roles. One is that you’re the agent, that you can do things that will get that desired object. Two, you’re the consumer, the one who’s going to enjoy it when you gain it. And three, there’s the commentator that talks about what you’re doing, passes judgment on you, observes what you’re doing, passes more judgment. Then the concentration involves the same three senses of self. As the Buddha said, you want to have what’s termed the sense of self that feels confident that you can do this. That’s the agent. One of the thoughts that Venerable Ananda, who was a student of the Buddha, said is really helpful in the path is that you think about all the people who came to Awakening. You say, “Well, they can do it. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. If they can do it, why can’t I?” You’re going to need that sense of confidence in yourself and your abilities to do things for this path to work. As for the self as a consumer, there are times when you feel discouraged on the path and think you might want to give up. Well, you ask yourself, “I got onto this path because I wanted to put an end to suffering. I love myself. And if I abandon this path, does it mean I don’t love myself anymore?” That’s to encourage you to stick with it. Then finally, the commentator. You look at what you’re doing. First, you survey your intentions behind what you’re doing. If your intentions are good, you want to stick with the breath. As long as your intentions are good, go ahead. If they’re not good, abandon the idea. Do something else instead. While you’re doing the good thing, if you see that any harm is coming up, you stop. Or at the very least, you try to adjust things so that you can at least eliminate the harm. And then when you’re done, you want to reflect on what you’ve done. If it ended up that you did cause harm, then you resolve not to repeat that mistake and you go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced on the path. But if you don’t see any harm, then you take joy in that fact and you continue training. In other words, you’re not satisfied and say, “Well, this is as good as it gets.” But you’re satisfied with the fact that you’re on the right path and you’re making progress. And you realize, of course, there’s more to be done and you’re happy to do it. That’s the kind of commentator you want. This is how the Buddha taught his son. His son was still seven years old. Years back, I was leading a retreat where he discussed this particular passage. And one of the people on the retreat was a psychotherapist who was leading a mindfulness therapy. So she took the passage, and the next day she took it to her group, Xeroxed it, passed it out, and asked the members of the group, “What do you think of the Buddha as a parent?” And they all said, “If we had parents like this, then we wouldn’t need these stupid mindfulness therapy groups.” In other words, the Buddha teaches you how to try to avoid a mistake, but when you make a mistake, there’s a way to learn from it. That’s the kind of commentator you want inside. A commentator is really helpful, especially as you’re doing meditation. You look at what you’re doing. If you’re getting good results, you keep on doing it. If you’re not getting good results, you don’t get upset. Just ask yourself, “What could I change? What could I do?” You don’t tell yourself you’re a miserable meditator. Just say, “Whatever that was I was doing is not right. There must be something better.” So it requires a certain amount of confidence in you as an agent, and a desire that you as the consumer will get something good to consume. So your commentator is wise, encouraging, and has compassion, both in understanding that you can make mistakes easily, but also understanding that you have to learn from them. You’re creating a good teacher inside. And all of these senses of self help along the path. Now there will come a point where you don’t need them anymore, because after all, your sense of self is a strategy. Think of all the different things you’ve desired in the past, and how many different “you’s” there are that pursued those desires. You’ve taken on many different identities as strategies. So here again, as you’re pursuing the path, the path doesn’t happen on its own. It’s not just one of letting go. You do have to develop things. You develop mindfulness. You develop alertness. You put forth effort. All of that requires a strong sense of self, a healthy sense of self, as a strategy. To remind you that, yes, you can do this, and two, it’s going to be worth it. But when you’ve attained the goal, then you don’t need those strategies anymore, either of self or of not-self. Not-self, of course, has to do with the things that you’re used to identifying with, but you realize you don’t need those old selves anymore. And you learn how to drop them. But when you’ve attained the ultimate goal, you don’t need any strategies. You’ve arrived. Through insight, through discernment, through concentration, all working together. So don’t be too quick to drop your sense of self. Learn how to train it. Realize that it’s an activity. It’s something you do, something you put together. If you realize you can put it together well, if you nail yourself down with having just one particular sense of self, you limit yourself. But if you realize you can choose these strategies, then you use them as you need them, and you put them down. The image that the forest ajahns give is of making a table. And you’ve got tools to make the table. So you pick them up, put them down, pick them up, put them down. Use the hammer, put the hammer down. Use the saw, then put the saw down. Until you finish the table. And then when you finish the table, then you put all the tools down and enjoy the table you’ve got. So learn how to use these fabrications, the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the images you hold in mind, the feelings you focus on. The way you talk to yourself. Use whatever sense of self is helpful. Drop whichever ones are not. And as you engage in these fabrications, you finally develop a sense of dispassion for them. In other words, you see how good they can get, but then you also see their limitations. It’s when you see their limitations that you put them down. But you have to test their limitations. If someone tells you to abandon fabrications, and you do it out of a sense of duty, you’re going to pick them up again. But if you’ve seen there’s something better that comes when you let them down, put them down, then you’re not going to be inclined to pick them up again. You’ve seen their limitations through pushing against their limits. They say they’re in constant stress. That’s not self. Well, you try to create a state of concentration that is constant and easeful and under your control, and see how far you can take that. It’s when you’ve invested in the concentration and then seen its limitations. That’s when the limitations really hit home, that this is the best thing you can put together with your mind. But it too has its limitations. And you believe the Buddha when he says there’s something better. That’s when you put it down. That’s when you abandon it. But only after you learn how to do it well.

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