

Bathed in the Breath

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

December, 2002

When there's a Dhamma talk, you don't have to listen. The important thing is to stay with your breath. When the breath comes in, you know it's coming in; when it goes out, you know it's going out. Try to make that experience of the breath fill your awareness as much as possible. The Dhamma talk here is a fence to keep you corralled with the breath. When the mind wanders off, here's the sound of the Dhamma to remind you to go back to the breath, but when you're with the breath you don't need reminding. You do your own reminding. That's what the mindfulness does in the meditation. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, remind yourself to stay with the breath. Make just a little mental note: "This is where you want to stay, this is where you want to stay."

And try not to think of yourself as inhabiting one part of the body watching the breath in another part of the body. Think of the breath as all around you. It's coming in and out the front, coming in and out the back, down from the top, all the way out to your fingers, all the way out to your toes. There's a subtle breath energy coming in and out of the body all the time. If you're in one part of the body watching the breath in the other part, you're probably blocking the breath energy to make space for that sense of "you" in the part of the body that's watching. So think of yourself as totally surrounded by the breath, bathed in the breath, and then survey the whole body to see where there are still sections of the body that are tense or tight, that are preventing the breath from coming in and going out. Allow them to loosen up.

This way you allow for the fullness of the breath to come in, go out, each time there's an in-breath, each time there's an out-breath. Actually the fullness doesn't go in and out. There's just a quality of fullness that's bathed by the breath coming in, bathed by the breath going out. It's not squeezed out by the breath. It's not forced out by the breath. Each nerve in the body is allowed to relax and have a sense of fullness, right here, right now. Simply try to maintain that sense of fullness by the way you breathe. Your focus is on the breath, but you can't help but notice the fullness.

If you can't get that sense of fullness going throughout the whole body, find at least some part of the body that doesn't feel squeezed out, that feels open and expansive, and then see if you can copy that same feeling tone in other parts of the body. Notice the other different parts of the body where it feels open like that

and allow them to connect. At first, nothing much will happen from that sense of connection, but allow it to stay open, stay open. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, maintain that sense of openness, openness, and the sense of connection will get stronger.

This is why the ability to stay with these sensations is so important, for your staying with them is what allows them to grow. If you move off to someplace else, if you're thinking of something else, there will have to be a tensing-up in the body to allow that thought to happen. Whatever sense of fullness might have developed—say, in your arms or your legs, in different parts of the body, down your back—doesn't have a chance to develop. It gets squeezed off because you're not paying attention to it any more.

This is why the Buddha talks about concentration as *mahaggatam cittam*: an enlarged awareness. If your awareness is limited just to one little spot, everything else gets squeezed out, everything else gets blotted out—and what is that if not ignorance? You're trying to make your awareness 360 degrees, all around in all directions, because the habit of the mind is to focus its awareness in one spot here, then one spot there, moving around, but there's always the one spot, one spot, one spot. It opens up a little bit and then squeezes off again, opens up a little bit, squeezes off again, and nothing has a chance to grow. But if you allow things to open up throughout the *whole* body, you realize that if you think about anything at all you destroy that openness. So you've got to be very, very careful, very, very still, to allow this open fullness to develop.

So these qualities of consistency, care, and heedfulness are important in allowing this state of concentration to develop. Without them, nothing much seems to happen. You have a little bit of concentration, then you step on it, a little bit of concentration, then you squeeze it off as you go looking at something else, thinking about something else. And so whatever little bits and pieces of concentration you do have, don't seem very remarkable. They don't get a chance to be remarkable. Concentration takes time—and our society's pretty extraordinary in fostering the expectation that things should happen quickly. If anything's going to be good, it has to happen quickly, it has to be instant. And so, by and large, we've lost the ability to stay with things as they develop slowly. We've lost the ability to keep chipping away, chipping away, chipping away at a large task that's going to take time and can't be speeded up.

When the Buddha gives images for practicing concentration, he often relates them to skills. Skills take time, and he was teaching people who had taken the time to master many useful skills. In Thailand, they still sharpen knives against stones, and it's a skill you have to learn: how not to ruin the knife as you're sharpening it. If you get impatient and try to speed things up, you'll ruin the sharpness, the straightness of the blade. So you have to be very still. The mind

has to be still, and you have to maintain just the right amount of pressure constantly as you sharpen the blade. At first it may seem like nothing is happening, but over time the blade does get sharper and sharper. The consistency of your pressure is what guarantees that the blade won't get worn in one particular spot—too sharp in one spot and not sharp enough in another, too sharp in the sense that the blade is no longer straight. You've worn it down too much in one spot. There are a lot of things you have to watch out for, simply in the act of sharpening a blade. But if you have that skill in your repertoire, then when the time comes to meditate, it's easier to relate to what you're doing: that same kind of consistency, that same evenness of pressure, the continual mindfulness and alertness that are needed to maintain the proper pressure.

Another skill sometimes used as an analogy is that of a hunter. A hunter has to be very quiet so as not to scare the animals off, and at the same time very alert so as not to miss when a particular animal comes by. In the same way, we as meditators have to be careful not to slip off in either direction: into too much stillness or too much mental activity. You have to find the proper balance. I was once talking to an anthropologist who said that of all the skills in primitive societies that anthropologists try to learn, the hardest is hunting. It requires the strongest concentration, the most sensitivity. So here we're not hunting animals, but we're hunting concentration, which is even more subtle and requires even more stillness and alertness.

Sometimes we in the West think that we come to the Dhamma with an advantage: We've got so much education, we're so well-read. But we have a major disadvantage in that we lack the patience and consistency that come with mastering a skill. So keep that in mind as you're meditating, when you find yourself getting impatient for results. You have to be watchful and consistent. You need that sense of being bathed by the breath, being open to the breathing sensations in all parts of the body down to every little pore of your skin. Then you learn the sensitivity that's required, the consistency that's required, to maintain that. That way the sense of fullness can grow and grow and grow until it becomes really gratifying, really satisfying, to give your concentration the kind of strength, the sense of refreshment, the sense of nourishment it needs in order to keep going.

Ajaan Fuang once said that without this sense of fullness, refreshment, or rapture, your meditation gets dry. You need this lubricant to keep things smooth and running: the sense of well-being and refreshment, the immediate visceral pleasure of being in a concentrated state.

At the same time, it heals all our mental wounds: any sense of tiredness, of being stressed-out, mistreated, abused. It's like medicine for these mental wounds. Now, medicine often takes time to work, especially *soothing* and

reconstituting medicine. Think of the creams you put on chapped skin. The skin isn't immediately cured when you first rub on the cream. It takes time. The skin has to be exposed to the cream for long periods of time to allow the cream to do its work. The same with concentration. It's a treatment that takes time. Your nervous system needs to be exposed to the sense of fullness for a long period of time, giving it a chance to breathe in, breath out all around so that the mindfulness and the breath together can do their healing work.

So don't get impatient. Don't feel that nothing is happening. A lot of things that are very important require time, and they do their work subtly. If you give them the time they need, you find that you're more than repaid. After all, you could be sitting for the whole hour planning next week, planning next month, planning next year. What will you have at the end of the hour? A lot of plans. And part of you may feel satisfied that you've provided for the future, but when you reflect on how many of your past plans have actually borne results, you'll realize the odds against your new plans' ever amounting to much. What would you have to show for your hour then? Nothing very certain. Maybe nothing but mouse-droppings and straw. But if you give the breath an hour to do its healing work, totally opening up the body to allow the breath to bathe every nerve out to every pore, you know that you'll come out at the end of the hour with a body and mind in much better shape. The body will be soothed; the mind, bright and alert.

And you don't need to stop being bathed in the breath when the hour is up. You can keep it going in all your activities. That way, even though you may not be armed with a whole set of plans for facing the future, at least you're in a position where you don't need that kind of armor. You've got the armor of a healthy body and mind. You've got an invisible armor: the force-field of this all-encompassing breath, continually streaming out from your center to every pore, protecting you on all sides. That's something you feel in every cell of your body, something you know for sure, for you can sense it all around you, right here, right now. And you know that whatever the future brings, you're prepared. You can handle it.

This sense of fullness, brightness, alertness: That's all you'll need to keep the mind capable, healthy, and strong.