

## *A Sense of Well-being*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

*July 2, 2003*

They say that your brainwaves can be measured even in your little toe—which shows that the energy of your thoughts fills your whole body, fills your whole experience. Normally we don't realize how much energy we're giving off, how much energy we're radiating, and what the quality of that energy is. Only when you make the mind really, really quiet can you begin to sense the shadow radiation put off by the mind. Only then can you sense how much that energy shapes your experience, how much it affects the experience of the people around you.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on the question of intention, because that's where the energy shaping our lives really lies, in the intentions of the mind. What we experience consists of the intentions themselves together with the energy they create, the ripple effect they create—from intentions in the present and intentions in the past—as those ripple patterns intersect and interfere. That's what shapes our experience. And one of the main lessons in meditation lies in seeing how that happens.

But even before you see it happen, the Buddha's training gets you to develop skillful intentions, both because they have a good effect on your life, and also because they make it easier to see what's going on. Unskillful intentions put up a lot of interference, make it hard to see. You do things and say things that are really unskillful and you don't realize what you've done because you've created such turbulence. This is why the Buddha teaches us to practice generosity, to observe the precepts, because the intentions that go into generosity and virtue are skillful in and of themselves and also allow us to see more and more of what's going on, to gain an appreciation of how much our intentions do shape everything.

When we've made a practice of generosity and virtue, then by the time we come to sit down and meditate we've already had some experience in seeing the power of our intentions. The meditation becomes a laboratory for experimenting even more, in more detail, to get a more subtle sense of what's going on so that you can detect your intentions as soon as they arise and can do something about them. If they're not skillful, you can make them skillful; if they're already relatively skillful, you can make them even more so.

You can notice this when you focus on the breath. Your perception of the breath is shaped by the intentions you've had in the course of a day. The parts of

the body that you tensed up in order to do this, in order to think about that, still leave a shadow in your experience of the body. You notice sometimes if you spent the day working, say hammering or weeding, when you sit down to meditate everything in the mind seems to involve hammering or weeding. Those are the leftover shadows of the intentions. And your sense of the body as a weeder or hammerer is still lying around in there, too.

So when you start out with the breath you want to cleanse these things out of your body as much as you can. This is why you work through the sensations of the breathing systematically to start noticing where the tension is, how you can relax it so that you can bring things back to normal. It's from that state of normalcy — *aware* normalcy — that you begin to notice how the tension will build up again around a new thought. That insight makes it easier and easier to see what's going on in the present moment, and not get trapped by what's going on, because you've got less and less residue holding over from the past and no new residue building up in the present.

So work through the tension in the body. It doesn't really matter where you start, as long as you start with a point that's comfortable. You want to work from a position of strength, a sense of wellbeing, a sense of being secure. Once you've got that sense of wellbeing established, you can let it spread through the different parts of your body, the different parts of your awareness. You might want to go through the body a couple of times because each time you go through it your perceptions get more and more refined, more and more subtle. In fact you can get to the point where the breath in the body seems to stop.

Then the question arises: "Where do you focus then?" Well, focus on the stillness. It's still a type of energy in the body. It's simply energy that has grown still. From this point you begin to see other things that are even more refined — that your sense of the shape of the body, or the boundary between the inside and outside of the body, begins to dissolve, and you realize that that involved intention as well. And for the time being you can let that boundary drop. It's not that you're going to totally lose your sense of the shape of the body forever. You can take it on again any time you want to, but you begin to see that there is a choice involved there. You can sit with the body as a shapeless mist of atoms, or you can focus on the sensations that give shape to the mist. There are lots of potential sensations just waiting for you to work with here.

When you see that, you begin to realize exactly how much your present intentions really do shape what you're experiencing. If you want there to be a shape, there are sensations that will conform to that desire, that will verify that there is a shape to the body, and you can make it happen. Then the perceptions influence the intentions, and the intentions influence the perceptions, and if you don't watch out you can actually get yourself all tied up in knots. Some people,

for instance, begin to feel as if their bodies are made out of lead because they focus too intently on the perceptions of solidity. When it's too heavy like that you can turn your perception around. You can intentionally focus on the more open, shapeless sensations, the space sensations that are already present in different parts of the body. You can deal with them in the same way that you dealt with the breath. Let that sensation of space permeate throughout the body erasing the sensations that you had emphasized to create a sense of heaviness or shape.

You begin to realize that this is not a process of creation from nothing. There are potentials already there. The question is: which potentials are you going to emphasize. Which ones are you going to focus on to create the sense of shape? Which potentials are you going to focus on to erase it? The choice is yours. You can see this most clearly when the breath is still. When the breath is moving, the process of breathing in and of itself creates a shape for the body.

As Ajaan Lee recommends, when you let the breath energy open up to every pore, that allows the breath to calm down, calm down, calm down. Think of every pore in your skin opening up wide. All the muscles that tighten up the pores: allow them to relax. You'll find that the breath will calm down radically. That opens up the way for the sensations of space, the openness, the holes in your skin, the inner sensations of space and the outer sensations of space to connect. Then you can take space as your object.

So in the process of practicing concentration and getting the mind more and more subtle, more and more refined, you're also learning interesting lessons about the role of perception, the role of intention, in how you experience things. You see how much your intentions really are an energy that creates all kinds of experiences. *And that's a lot of what Buddhist insight is about, seeing the role of intention.* When the texts describe dependent co-arising, one of the basic patterns starts with name and form and consciousness acting together to create all the processes leading up to suffering. Well, intention is an important part of "name." It's one of the major causal factors in how we experience things. And you can see it operating here as you practice concentration.

You also see it as you try to take this relaxed state of wellbeing out into the world. On the one hand you see the problem of maintaining it, because all sorts of other intentions start getting in the way. You've got to deal with this person, speak with that person, deal with this situation and that. And the skill lies in how you can maintain this inner sense of openness and wellbeing without letting your intentions connected to the world trample all over it.

You also have to learn how to protect it from the energies of other people. When you're open like this, you sense other people's energies a lot more. This is when it's important to think of the breath energy in the body as giving off a kind of radiation, a protective field to prevent those other negative energies from

coming in to affect you. If you just leave yourself wide open, you pick up negative things from other people. So you've got to be careful. This is when you need a kind of barrier around you, a protective energy barrier, the breath flowing throughout the whole body like this does provide that. Just be alert to that potential, learn how to maintain it.

As you do this, you find another effect happening as well: your energy becomes a more positive influence on other people. The way people react to you will change, the influence you have on other people will become a better influence. And you begin to see that the effort put into maintaining this inner sense of openness and wellbeing while you're doing other things is not simply adding one more task onto all the other tasks you've got in the world. It actually simplifies things a lot. Try to make this your center of gravity. Make this the point from which you're operating, your position of strength.