

## *Why the Breath*

*January 9, 2004*

We watch the breath so we can watch the mind. The breath is like a mirror for the mind. When you look at the way you breathe, you can get a good sense of what's going on in the mind. If you get really familiar with the breath, you can begin to detect things that are happening in the mind that you otherwise might have missed. When there's greed, when there's anger, when there's delusion, they'll show up in the breath. You find, though, that not only does the breath reflect the mind, but you can also use the breath to have an effect on the mind as well. Say, when there's anger, you consciously change the rhythm of your breathing. That will have an effect on the mind. So the principle of cause and effect goes both ways here. The mind has an effect on the breath; the breath can have an effect on the mind.

But to get the most use out of that principle you have to be willing to spend a lot of time with the breath, to get to know it, to explore how the whole process of breathing happens in the body. There are times when you have to be gentle in the exploration. When you start surveying the body, you begin to notice whole parts that seem to have disappeared. Your shoulder may be gone, it seems, or part of your back, or a place down the hips. Our immediate reaction when we notice something like this is to barge right in and straighten things out. That's an area where you have to be very careful, and be very observant. The hip hasn't gone anywhere; the shoulder hasn't gone anywhere. It's there. It's just that on a subconscious level you've hooked them up with the rest of the body in a strange and indirect way.

So you have to be very, very observant, and watch for a while to see exactly where things have hooked up, and where you might suggest a few new ways of hooking things up. Because if you just barge into those parts of the body, they close up even more. It's like someone who's used to being abused. When someone comes in to help them in an aggressive way, they just experience it as more abuse. So they close up. The trick is being patient, watching, nudging a little here, nudging a little there, seeing what works, seeing what doesn't work. And bit by bit as you get more familiar with the body, more familiar with the breath, things will begin to settle down. Things will begin to connect up.

So be willing to get to know this one thing very well. There's an old Russian proverb, I understand, that talks about two different kinds of knowledge. There's the knowledge of the fox and the knowledge of the hedgehog. The fox knows a lot

of things, but very superficially. The hedgehog knows only one thing, but it knows it through and through. What we're working on here as we meditate is hedgehog knowledge. You really want to know the breath.

Once you've got the breath, then you've got a really good position for observing the mind. Even in the course of exploring the breath, you learn a lot about the mind as well. You get a sense of how the mind focuses its awareness on things. Exactly what is awareness? How many layers are there? There's the focal point of awareness, and there's that background awareness that fills the whole body. It's there already, it's simply a matter of getting the focused awareness in touch with it, learning to settle in with it there with the background, and keep our awareness of that background open as much as we can. All too commonly when we focus on one thing, we try to close off as many other things as possible just to maintain that focus. That puts huge areas of our awareness in the shadows. Sometimes that's necessary and sometimes it's not. But to unlearn the habit, we have to be very persistent. Once you get a sense of the whole body, try to keep that as open as much as you can.

That's where the skill comes in. It's not some sort of mystic spaciousness where you get in touch with the Buddha-nature or anything like that. It's simply the background awareness. It's there. And there's the question of being consciously in touch with it, being consciously open with it, or not. When you're more in touch with the background, you begin to notice the point, or the focus of the mind: here, there, wherever it moves. And you're less likely to get knocked off by changes in the focal point. If your concentration is totally limited to one focal point, then as soon as anything disturbs it at all, then you're gone. You've lost the concentration. But if your concentration encompasses that background, then even though there may be a little bit of wavering in the focal point, you've still got the background in place. Your foundation is still there.

So stay here with the breathing. Be observant, be patient, because the processes of getting to know the breath, getting to know the mind, are long-term processes. We've lived so much of our lives in ignorance of our own mind, in ignorance of our own breath, so it's going to take a while to really get to know them.

So each time you meditate, open your mind to the possibility that you may learn something new, because there's always something new here to notice. Even though it seems to be familiar territory, there are lots of details to explore. And it's in focusing on the details, getting to know them, that you can learn a lot.

This is a common theme throughout the teachings: Simple things we do every day are the things we should study, because everything we need to know is right there. The whole question of intention and attention, the Buddha points out, is

lying at the basis of so much of our suffering. It's right here in our actions. What things do we attend to? How do we look at things, and then how do we make up our minds to do things? And when we make up our minds to do things, what's the motivating factor? You dig down not too deep, and you find that it's a quest for happiness. We do things because we think we'll be happier by doing them. Yet psychologists have shown that people are amazingly ignorant about what's going to give them happiness and what's not. Things they've done many, many times before, and they know it's not all that satisfying a happiness, but they still do them again and again anyhow. Partly because of the familiarity—they feel better doing something they're familiar with—and partly because they haven't really examined what they're doing, and what the results are, and how they might be improved.

We've talked many times about the Buddha's instructions to his son Rahula, saying, before you do something, to look at your intention and ask yourself: "Is this something that will lead to happiness—either for yourself, or other people—or is it going to cause pain?" If it's going to cause pain and suffering, then don't do it. Act only on the intentions that aim for happiness and for well-being. Then while you're doing the action, check the results. Some results come immediately. You stick your hand in a fire, you know immediately that it's hot, and you pull it out. So if you see that the action is having some unintended results that are actually causing suffering, then you drop the action, you stop. If you see no harm or suffering, you keep continuing with it. Then, when you're done, you check the long-term results. If the action ended up causing harm, resolve not to repeat it. If it didn't cause any harm, take joy and continue on the path.

What's interesting is what the Buddha says that at the end of this. When you reflect on your thoughts, your words, and your deeds in this way, this is how you purify your thoughts, words, and deeds. We very rarely think of purity as being tied up to the quest for happiness. But as the Buddha said, that's where you find purity, in really getting perceptive and intelligent about how you look for happiness, observing how you're looking for happiness, and being careful to make sure that your actions are in line with your most skillful intentions.

So the quest for happiness is not a bad thing. I was talking yesterday with someone who said after her academic career being trained as a psychologist, she never took the issue of happiness all that seriously. It seemed like something that would come or go pretty randomly. She was amazed to discover that the Buddha had devoted a whole body of teaching just to that one issue: the quest for happiness and treating it as a skill. But when you come right down to it, what else is there? If we're not conscious about our quest for happiness, it goes underground, and then we don't know what we're doing.

So the Buddha says to bring it up into the open. Even when you're just breathing, notice that when you start focusing on the breath, there's a natural tendency to want the breath to be comfortable. Well, follow the tendency. Don't fight it. Don't push it underground. And look at your actions in every aspect of your life and see whether the happiness you're looking for is actually being produced by what you do. Often we repeat our unskillful actions, not because they don't produce any happiness at all, but they give us a little bit, and we focus only on that little bit. We ignore the larger suffering we are causing. So you want to look to see both where the gratification is and where the drawbacks of those actions are. Once you really see both sides, then you can compare them: Are the drawbacks worth it? Is the gratification worth the pain of the drawbacks? Once you're clear and aboveboard with yourself about both sides, then you can start looking for the way out, for the escape.

The Buddha says that insight basically comes down to five things: The first two are seeing things being originated by causes and seeing them pass away. This refers not just to experiences rising and passing away independent of your decisions, like the things happening on a TV screen. These are decisions you make, intentions you have. They're originated by causes and they pass away. That's the really interesting arising and passing away. You watch things arise and pass away, and then you look for three other things: the gratification they give, their drawbacks, and then the escape from falling for the gratification.

That's complete knowledge, the kind of knowledge we're working on here. Give the mind a good solid basis so you can watch things come and go, watch as intentions come and go. When the mind decides to act, see what happens as the action is taking place, and then when the action is done, does it totally go? Or does it leave a trace? What gratification do you get out of the action? What are the drawbacks of the action? When you compare the gratification to the drawbacks, what kind of balance do you get? And if it's not worth it, what are you going to do to gain release from it? In other words, if it's an action that really isn't all that helpful, if the gratification isn't worth it, what are you going to do to stop? What other things are you going to do in its place to find happiness instead?

The Buddha doesn't tell us to give up our search for happiness. He tells us to become more intelligent in how we go about it, more observant. What's amazing is that through this process we ultimately purify our thoughts, words, and deeds, we purify our mind. Because our big ignorance lies right here, in what we're doing to try to gain happiness, how it's falling short, and how we don't admit it to ourselves: All these things.

So look here, bring the light of your awareness to this issue right here. By focusing on the breath, we put ourselves in the right place to watch, because taking the breath as our foundation gives us a place where we can step outside our thought processes—to watch them, as the Buddha says, as something separate. We watch them and see what happens as a result. And when we're at the breath, we're at the point where the mind and the body meet: the ideal position to watch mental actions, physical actions, and verbal actions, all at the same time, from this one standpoint.

So there are lots of good reasons to stay with the breath. Keep reminding yourself about that. This gives rise to the quality that's called *chanda*, desire, one of the bases for success in the meditation.

But it also gives rise to understanding. Often we focus on the breath, and after we've been at it a while, we tend to forget why you're doing it. So keep reminding yourself that you're here to maintain the mind in the right spot to understand itself. That thought gives you both the motivation you need to stick with the practice, and the perspective you need to make sure that your practice stays on course.