

## *What You Bring to the Moment*

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We bring in a lot of conditioning to the present moment. Even in the simple act of looking at something or listening to something, there's usually a motive. Dependent co-arising—the Buddha's map of how and why we suffer—states that contact comes after a lot of other conditions. Intention comes before contact. The act of attention comes before contact. We're predisposed to look at certain things and to ignore others. So of course our perceptions are going to be skewed.

One of the things I noticed when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang was a certain skepticism in him. He'd watch people for a long time before he trusted them. Sometimes he actually seemed suspicious of their motives. I know a lot of people would think that that's a sign of an unawakened person, but actually it's a sign of a very careful person. It comes from the fact that he had learned to be suspicious and skeptical of his own motives, his own conditioning, which is what you've got to do as a meditator. You've got to question the intentions you bring to your practice, even the simple act of looking and listening to things, the simple act of watching your breath. You can't assume that you're coming here with really pure motives, because if you do, you miss out on a lot. You'll never understand the conditioning that comes into play.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha, in prefacing his instructions on meditation, recommends restraint of the senses. If you practice restraint of the senses, after a while you begin to notice that the problem is not the things out there. The problem is your motivation for looking or listening to those things. The mind is primed to look for certain details. When it's in a mood to be lustful, it's going to look for certain details. When it's in the mood to be angry, it's going to look for other details. The details may aggravate the lust or the anger, but the fact is, you're already looking for trouble. That should alert you to some of the conditioning you bring to the present moment, so that by the time you come to sit down and look at the breath, you're also primed to look at what your preconceived ideas are that might get in the way.

Where is the breath in dependent co-arising? It's down there in the name and form. And even prior to that, it's in fabrications, *sankhara*, right after ignorance. If you look at your breath through ignorance—in other words, not in terms of four noble truths—even just the act of breathing together with your perceptions and feelings about the breath can lead to suffering.

Notice, the Buddha doesn't have you totally erase your conditioning when you look at the breath. There's never any mention of bare attention or bare awareness in his teachings. Instead, he says, learn how to condition your mind in such way that it'll be able to deal with the breath in a way that'll lead to awakening. After all, the path to awakening is something conditioned. The noble eightfold path is a whole series of conditions. The only thing that's unconditioned in the Buddha's teaching is nibbana.

This is why, instead of totally wiping out preconceived notions, we learn to question the preconceived notions we have, and then replace them with notions that will actually be helpful, that will point our attention in the right direction and ultimately lead to the unconditioned.

So let's take a close look at how the Buddha describes fabrication. What is there along with the breathing? There's also what he calls verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, which is what you're supposed to bring to the breath as you meditate. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate how it's going. Is it comfortable? Is it not? What can you do to make it comfortable? That's looking at it in terms of the feelings, which are the mental fabrications.

Then there are also the perceptions. These play a huge role in how you relate to the breath. Learn how to question your preconceived notions about what's happening when you breathe. The breath, after all, is part of the wind element, and which of the elements are doing the breathing? The breath is what breathes. It's the element that sets everything else in motion.

All too often we have the idea that the solid parts of the body have to be pushed out by the liquid element, and as that expands, it pulls the breath in. Actually, there's breath energy that pulls in more breath energy. Learn how to relate to the breath in that way. Your whole body: Think of it as breath, and you'll find that whatever tight or constricted or uncomfortable ways you have of breathing tend to dissolve away. In other words, if there's a tightness in your stomach, it's not because the solid element in there has suddenly solidified. It's just because the breath is blocked.

So think of it as not something solid down there that you're trying to push against, but simply as a stagnant breath energy. Relate to it in that way, bring that perception to the breathing, and that'll help open things up. Or think of the breath as surrounding you—you're totally bathed in the breath all around. Bring that perception to the breath and see what that does.

This will give you some insight into the simple process of conditioning. On the one hand, it makes it easier to sit here. You can sit for longer periods of time

because it feels better. On the other hand, there's a certain amount of insight that arises as well, as you begin to see, "Oh, simply sitting here breathing, there are already other conditions." The mind shapes the breath, shapes your experience of the breath. The perceptions you bring, the feelings you bring to it, can filter the way you relate to such a basic process. That should alert you to the way you relate to other processes as well, both within the body and outside, dealing with other people. The more you're alert to your preconceived notions, the more you can free yourself from the unskillful ones.

Once when I was in Thailand, I was talking to a woman who insisted that she had finally achieved a state of mind where basically all her work was done as a meditator. She said anger would arise, lust would arise, but it was perfectly automatic. She simply had to watch it dissolve away. That was it. I told her, "Well, you have to look further. You're not seeing the conditions that are putting these things together." She was very resistant to that. So I stopped, didn't say anything more. It's one of the big dangers in meditation if you refuse to see the conditioning you're bringing to what's happening. If everything seems automatic, that's because you're not looking carefully.

So in this practice of playing with the breath, you're not just playing around. You're learning to explore the process of conditioning, trying to bring appropriate attention to what you're doing—in other words, seeing it in terms of the four noble truths. You have certain ways of conceiving things that create unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering, and you can change those preconceived ways. But if you don't look for them, you are not going to see them. They just seem to be automatic, part of the landscape, and you'll never get to dig down and see exactly what you're bringing to the present moment. At the same time, if you don't learn to develop a certain suspicion about your preconceived ideas, preconceived motives, you'll never see past them. It's part of being heedful.

So as you go through the day, be careful about how you look—not about your appearance, but about how you look at things. Try to catch sight of what your motives are. Put a question mark next to them, and you begin to see things you didn't see before. As that habit develops, you bring it to the meditation. When the breath seems to go in certain way, ask yourself, "Is that actually what's happening? Is that actually what's going on?" In particular, look to see, "Is the breathing as comfortable as it could be? Am I doing anything to interfere with the process?" After all, if it's simply breath breathing breath, there should be real sense of lightness, fullness in the body.

But if something seems to be getting in the way, the question is: "Is it what I'm doing now or something I did in the past?" In other words, maybe it's an illness in

the body that comes from past karma, about which you can't do much. But you can change the way you relate to it. You can change the way you relate any stress or pain in the body. Always think of the breath first. Look carefully: When there's pain in the body, do you find yourself using the pain to breathe? If you catch yourself doing that, can you change? Think of breath breathing. The breath comes first. The breath comes before the pain. Think of it coming before the pain and see what that does.

When you can learn to question things in this way, then you see things you didn't see before. That's what the meditation is all about, reaching the previously unreached, attaining the previously unattained, knowing things you didn't know before. And the only way you can do this is to question the things that you take for granted. Most often, those are the things that are actually blocking your vision.