

Befriending the Breath

January 3, 2007

Reflect back on the passage we chanted just now: “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy. May all beings be freed from their suffering. May those who are happy not be deprived of their happiness.” These are good thoughts to think. They put the mind in a good place, a place where you’re not wishing ill to anyone at all. You’re wishing them well. And you’re wishing well for yourself, too. Sometimes people find that hard, but if you can’t wish for your own true happiness, what are you wishing for?

The desire for true happiness is nothing to feel ashamed about. In fact, the whole teaching of the Dhamma is based on that desire, recognizing that if you follow through with your desire for true happiness intelligently, if you really are careful about how you go about finding it, you’ll actually find it and won’t harm anyone in the process. It’s a desire that should be respected.

The world, however, teaches us not to respect it. People will tell you, “Forget about true lasting happiness; just go for the thrill of purchase, the thrill of a relationship in the beginning stages. Go for the quick and easy, but also the quick to fade. As for true happiness, forget about it.” That’s what they say.

But the message of the Dhamma is that if you don’t wish for true happiness, what are you wishing for? This is the one assumption that the Buddha makes about human beings. Sometimes you read that the Buddha assumes that everybody is basically good at heart, but you can’t find that in the texts. What he does assume is that everyone wants happiness. The problem is that we go about it in confused and misinformed ways. But if we can find a path to true happiness that really works, everyone would be happy because true happiness is something that doesn’t harm anyone at all. Your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. Keep that in mind. This is why we chant this passage every day.

They say that Ajaan Mun spread thoughts of goodwill to all living beings three times a day: in the morning when he woke up, in the afternoon when he woke up from his nap, and at night before he went to sleep. In this way, the desire for goodwill, the desire for true happiness, framed his practice. So it’s good to establish it as a frame for your practice as well. It helps remind you of why you’re here. There will be barren patches in your meditation, patches where things don’t seem to be going the way you want them to. When you hit these

patches, remember that you're doing this for true happiness, something that goes beyond the ordinary quick fix. That helps get you over the rough spots.

So always keep these thoughts in mind. Remember that goodwill and compassion are qualities you can't separate from the Buddha's teachings on wisdom and discernment. You have to understand how to go about true happiness if your desire for happiness is actually going to get results.

What this comes down to is training the mind. All the Buddha's teachings—on generosity, virtue, and meditation, or on virtue, concentration, and discernment—are aimed at training the mind because the mind is what shapes our experience of pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering. A well-trained mind can deal with any situation in life and not have to suffer at all.

What does it mean to train the mind? It means to look at what you're doing and to see what the results are. Then you learn to refrain from things that cause suffering, no matter how much you like doing them, and to do the things that lead to true happiness, whether you like doing them or not. Some of the things that lead to true happiness are really pleasant to do. Others require effort. They go against the grain. You have to learn not to let your resistance to the effort get in the way. You need a clear sense of cause and effect. That's what discernment is all about: seeing what really works in terms of cause and effect, what doesn't really work, and then adjusting your actions accordingly.

We're here to train the mind to be its own best friend. One very visceral way of doing this is to focus on your breath. When the Buddha analyzes the way you cause yourself suffering, very early on in the list he says that if you're ignorant of what's really going to work, then even the way you breathe can lead to suffering.

So let's focus on the way we breathe. Where do you sense the breath right now? When you close your eyes, what sensations let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? Focus on them. They can be in any part of the body at all, for "breath" here means the flow of energy. Sometimes you'll sense the breath as the feeling of the air moving in and out of the nose, but it can also be the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest. Sometimes those movements send ripples out to different parts of the body, so that you can sense even in your arms or your legs whether you're breathing in or breathing out. So wherever you find it convenient to focus, focus on the breath sensations there.

Then allow them to be comfortable. In other words, don't put too much pressure on them as you focus on them. At the same time, notice how long an in-breath feels good. At what point does the in-breath start feeling uncomfortable? Just breathe in as long as is comfortable, and then allow yourself to breathe out. Breathe out only as long as is comfortable, and then breathe back in again. Try to sensitize yourself to what feels good right now in terms of the breathing.

Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, with every cell in your body bathed with breath energy. When you think of the breath in that way, what kind of breathing feels good? You might find, as you start thinking in that way, that the breath gets deeper. If that feels gratifying, fine. If it feels uncomfortable, change the rhythm. Just think, "What would be more comfortable right now?" and see what the body does in response. Think of yourself as hovering around the breath. You're not squeezing it out; you're not forcing it in; you're just staying very close to it, watching it, letting it adjust in whatever way feels good. Give it some space to adjust. Sometimes you might want to nudge it a little bit and see what longer breathing would feel like, or what shorter breathing would feel like, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, and then notice what happens.

At first you may not sense much difference, but after a while you begin to get more sensitive to the breathing process. You become more of a connoisseur of your own breathing. You gain a sense of what kind of breathing really feels good for the body right now. The more satisfying the breath is, the easier you will find it to stay with the breathing. If the mind wanders off, just bring it right back to the breath. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Ask yourself, "Is the breath as comfortable as it could be?" and see what you need to change. But don't browbeat yourself over the fact that the mind is wandering. Don't get upset or discouraged. It's natural that it'll wander, for that's what it's been doing for so long.

You've probably heard the word *samsara*. It means wandering around. That's what the mind is used to doing. It's used to wandering. When you try to get it to stay in one place like this, it's going to resist. It's like training a puppy. You want it to come, and it seems to want to do everything else but come. But if you're firm with it, at the same time rewarding it when it does come, after a while it'll come willingly. So have some confidence in yourself. Remind yourself that this is a really useful skill to have, because we cause ourselves so much unnecessary stress and strain simply because we breathe in unskillful and oblivious ways. If you can master just this one skill, you change the way you relate to your body, you change the way you relate to the present moment, you have a greater reserve of wellbeing to draw on in any situation. If they threw you in prison, you could just sit there and breathe really comfortably. They wouldn't have to know. So in that way, you're not adding suffering to the pain already there.

So, you have an hour to get acquainted with the breath, to try to see what kind of breathing feels good right now, and then right now, right now. The needs of the body will change over time, so you have to be on top of them. Notice how they change. Make it a game. Don't be too grim about the meditation. After all, we're here trying to find pleasure in the breath. So treat it as a sport, something

you want to learn how to enjoy. As with any sport, it takes time, it takes training, it takes discipline. But there's also the element of enjoyment that comes when you're doing it well. It feels good. It feels right.

After all, the breath is the process in the body that you experience most directly. You sense your body through the movement of the breath. If the breath were not moving, of course you'd be dead. But if you could somehow be alive while the breath was not moving, even then you wouldn't sense the body at all. In fact, there are stages of concentration where the breath energy stops. The oxygen coming in through the pores of the skin is enough to keep you going because the brain is very still and isn't using much oxygen at that time. When that happens, you find that the shape of the body begins to dissolve. The breath is *that* essential to how you know your body.

In addition, the breath is also instrumental in how you move your body, by means of the breath energy running through the nerves and along the blood vessels. So here you are sensitizing yourself to your most direct experience of the body, and you're learning to relate to the body in a way that's comfortable.

At the same time, you find that the breath is a mirror for the mind. A sudden emotion comes into the mind, and the breath will change. That's one of the reasons we sometimes feel that we've got to get our anger out of our system: The way the breath has changed in response to the anger is uncomfortable. So you can undo that effect. As soon as you sense a change in the breath, you can consciously breathe in a way that dissolves away whatever tension has built up in the breathing. That weakens the power of the anger. This is another way the breath can be your friend. It's like having a friend who reminds you when you get angry that it's not in your best interest to be angry. It can soothe you when you're angry, put you in a better mood. It can be your friend when you're sick; it can be your friend when you're suffering from fear or any other strong, unpleasant emotion.

The breath can be there as your friend, but only if you learn how to befriend it. Get to know it. As with any friendship, it takes time. You can't just walk in and shake hands and say "Hi, you're my breath, I'm in charge of you, let's go." The breath doesn't respond well to that, just as a person wouldn't respond well to some stranger coming up and saying that. After all, you've been a stranger to your breath for who knows how long. It has been there for you, but you haven't been there for it. You haven't paid it much attention. You don't really know it well. So here's your opportunity to get on good terms with the breath. When you have your breath as your friend, you have a friend wherever you go, in any situation.

As the Buddha said, to really get to know someone requires (1) time and (2) being very observant. So. Here you've got a whole hour of time. It's up to you to

be observant and to see how well you can get to know the breath. To show some goodwill for the breath in a very direct and visceral way like this is to show goodwill for yourself, the wish that's expressed in that chant: "May I be happy." Here's one way to act on it. At the same time, you cause no harm to anyone else. The way you breathe doesn't directly affect anyone else at all. Indirectly, if you breathe in unskillful ways and uncomfortable ways, you're going to get irritable and take it out on other people. But if you're breathing comfortably, there's no irritation to take out on anybody at all. In this way, the fact that you're working with your breath is a way of showing goodwill for other people too.

So try to make the most of this opportunity.