

Lessons from the Breath

September 28, 2007

Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. If you want, you can use a meditation word along with the breath, like *buddho*. It means awake. Think *bud-* with in-breath, *dho* with the out-: *buddho, buddho*. Allow the breath to be comfortable. Try not to force it too much. You're not trying to nail the mind down; you're not trying to nail the breath down. You just want to keep track of how it's coming in, how it's going out. If you put too much pressure on it, it's going to rebel, like a child who you beat too much, who you're too harsh with. You have to give the breath some room.

This is an important principle in learning how to get along with your breath. It's very similar with learning how to get along with other people. If you get along well with your breath, it teaches you lessons on how to get along with others as well. So what you're learning when you train the mind is not just lessons for while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, it's also lessons for when your eyes are open as well, when you're walking around dealing with other people.

After all, in order for the breath to be comfortable, you have to listen to it. In other words, try to be sensitive to how it feels, be sensitive to the way you focus on it, and how that affects the breath. You've got to learn how to get along. If you don't get along, the mind isn't going to settle down, and you're not going to get much concentration. There will be very little peace of mind.

When you've learned your lessons here, you can take those lessons and apply them outside as well. To get along with other people, you've got to listen to them, be sensitive to how your words and actions affect them. See what they need.

When you're coming from a position of strength, it's a lot easier to deal with them. This is an even more direct connection between your breathing and your dealings with other people. If the breath feels good, the rest of the body can start feeling good, too. You can hook up to the breath energy in all the different parts of the body, and when you're coming from a position of comfort, you're coming from a position of strength.

In dealing with the breath, you're learning all the lessons you need for developing the brahmaviharas. You start out by approaching the breath with goodwill. You want it to be comfortable; you want it to be easeful.

Anywhere where it's not, you pay attention to what it needs. Does it need to be shorter, longer, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow? Make those changes where you can.

When it's already going well, you try to maintain that sense of ease. You don't take it for granted; you don't just throw it away. You appreciate it, recognize its importance.

Then in the areas of the breath where you can't make it go where you'd like, you have to develop equanimity.

So you've got lessons in all four brahmaviharas: goodwill, compassion, appreciation or empathetic joy, and equanimity. When you learn how to deal with the breath this way, it's a lot easier to deal with other people as well.

So this practice we're doing here is not just a practice for running away and having a nice mind states on our own. We're also learning how to develop those mind states and apply them to our dealings with other people. This is what you take back with you when you go. You develop a sensitivity, a wish for happiness. And you don't get cynical or jaded about that.

You're developing both the heart and the mind. In Buddhism, they don't make clear distinctions between heart and mind. In other words, the emotional side and the intellectual side of your psyche go together. They're two aspects of the same thing.

For instance, while you're learning about dependent co-arising, it may seem to have very little to do with heart issues like goodwill, but it really is connected quite a lot. Goodwill involves mental fabrication and verbal fabrication. It's something you consciously do with as much knowledge as possible, so that your mental and verbal fabrication don't cause suffering. You understand that when you think, when you have feelings and perceptions, if you do that with ignorance, it's going to cause suffering. But if you do it with knowledge, it goes in the other direction and helps form a basis for your other intentions as well.

When you're going to act—when you're going to say things, do things, or think things—it's based on your perceptions and your feelings, the things you focus on as being important.

This is all in the Buddha's analysis of why we suffer and how we can put an end to suffering. So you use that understanding to keep reminding yourself that thoughts of goodwill, the wish for happiness, are not a bad thing. They're actually a good thing. They're our motive for being on this path to begin with. We want to find true happiness. We want a happiness that doesn't cause any suffering to other people. If our happiness causes suffering to other people, it's not going to be true. It's going to be destroyed easily.

So we realize we want to base our actions, our attitudes so that they'll be as conducive to happiness as possible. This is where the brahmaviharas come in. You tell the mind part of your body-and-mind complex that this practice is an essential part of gaining release. At the same time, you teach your heart that it's going to have to respect the principles of causality. In other words, you wish happiness for others but you realize that there are certain things you simply can't do for them, or they can't do for themselves.

That's when you have to develop equanimity. If you wish happiness for others, sometimes you realize it's going to take time. The causes have to be right. And it's also going to have to depend on their attitudes as well. If you see someone doing things that are going to cause suffering, you can't simply say, "Well, may they continue doing those things and yet be happy." Or, "May they just stay the way they are and be happy." That doesn't work. You've got to recognize that if they're going to be happy, they'll have to change their ways, change their attitudes, their thoughts, their deeds, whatever it is that they're doing wrong.

So goodwill is not just hoping to be happy just as you are or wishing for other people to be happy just as they are. You've got to realize that sometimes changes have to be made. This is why we have the path. Sometimes the changes are just not going to get made, which is why you have to have equanimity. But when you see the opportunity for changes to be made, you go for it.

This is the part of having genuine goodwill for yourself. You're not just accepting yourself as you are, you're accepting the fact that you can change, that your actions have consequences, and you can't just wish for the consequences to be whatever you want them to be if you don't create the causes to be in line with what you want things to be. You've got to make adjustments in your behavior, in your attitudes.

If you're dealing with other people, and they simply won't change, well, that's when equanimity is for. Ajaan Fuang used to say that goodwill without the equanimity that comes from jhana or concentration practice can be a cause for suffering. You want other people to be happy, but they're simply not going to change their ways, or they can't change their ways. So you learn equanimity.

It's the same as when you're dealing with the breath. Sometimes you'd like it to be comfortable, but the uncomfortable feelings in different parts of your body simply will not go away no matter how you breathe, so you learn how to accept them. You work around them. When you find yourself running into an obstacle, you don't just give up. You think, "There must be another way around this obstacle one way or another. I can't get that person to change. But maybe just by

creating a good attitude, I can create a different environment for that person. Maybe someday they'll soften up, someday they'll be receptive."

What this means is that you train your head side to respect the desire for happiness, realizing that this is important. You train your heart side to respect causality, that simply wishing for happiness is not going to make it happen. There are things you've got to do, things you've got to change, skills you've got to develop and master. When your head and your heart are on the same page like this, both of them can grow. They help each other along.

It's here at the breath that your head and your heart can come together. When they come together here, they can come together in other areas of your life as well, for it's right here that you learn a lot of important lessons in putting the two of them together.

So you've got a whole hour to learn these lessons. Bring your full intelligence to this; bring your full heart to this. That's how eventually you'll get full results.