

Anapanasati Day

November 2, 2009

As you get more and more sensitive to your breath, you find that you get more sensitive to other things in the present moment as well. The feelings that go along with the breath—either feelings of ease, or dis-ease—and the state of your mind: Is it able to stay with the breath or not?

We often think that our minds are well concentrated and alert, and yet when you give the mind something very basic like this to watch and stay with, you begin to gain a sense of how often the mind slips off, how quickly it can forget. This makes you more and more sensitive to the qualities in the mind, the qualities that help make the mind skillful—in particular, skillful in dealing with the breath—and the qualities that make it unskillful.

As you focus on the breath, you find the all the frames of reference are here. There's the body, of which the breath is a part, and there are feelings that go along with the breath, the mind states, and then the individual qualities within the mind: skillful and unskillful. They're all right here.

This is why the Buddha makes a point that when he talks about breath meditation and divides it up into 16 steps, he divides the 16 into sets of four. He then says that you take any one of the four and use it to develop one of the frames of reference, and that frame of reference can develop the seven factors for awakening and lead to clear knowing and release.

So you don't need to think about all 16 steps, although it so happens that all 16 get involved, and you find that you will be going through all 16, not necessarily in order, one through 16, but there is a general pattern that gets followed in each of the four tetrads. That's important to notice. Each tetrad's structure starts with your getting sensitive to a certain aspect of your present awareness, either the body or feelings or mind states, or dhammas: mental qualities. You want to learn how to sensitize yourself to that particular aspect.

For instance, sensitize yourself to the breath. What's it like when you breathe long? What's it like when the breath is short? This requires a certain amount of concentration right there, just to stay with that particular level. It's like staying tuned to a radio station. If you want to hear what's being said on the radio station, you have to stick with that one station. You can't just go spinning the dial back and forth, and hope to make sense of anything. So you stick with the breath. Other thoughts come up, other ideas come up, whatever else comes up: Try to relate it to the breath so that you can maintain this frame of reference.

That gets you to the next step, which is to see the breath as a kind of dhamma. That means several things. One, seeing it as part of a causal network, and particularly seeing how the breath has an impact on how you experience your body. You can breathe in ways that are tense, you can breathe in ways that are relaxed, but you want to see it as part of a causal framework. You see it as a fabrication, a sankhara, something that has an intentional element.

This is important. This is probably why the Buddha used the breath as the most basic topic of meditation. It's the only automatic bodily process that you can also have intentional control over. If you're going to have control over your heartbeat, or control of other aspects of the body, the way some magicians do, you have to do it through the breath. This means that you can experiment. After all, if you're going to understand any causal connection, you have to play with the causes. If we couldn't act on causes, we'd have no true knowledge of anything in the world. Things would just pass by, pass by. This would come, that would go, this would come, that would go, but we wouldn't really know which coming and going was connected to which other coming and going, and which things just happen to be random.

This is one of the basic principle of scientific experiments. You try alternative causes to see what kind of effect they have. And it's the same with the breath. If you want to see the breath as a dhamma, you play with it to see how it has an effect on the body, to see how it has an effect on the mind, through the different feelings it creates. Then, when you get a sense of its range, it's like getting a stereo and playing with the dials. What's it like when you turn the bass all the way up? What's it like when you turn the treble all the way up? What's the right balance? After you've gone through the extremes, you learn how to adjust things to get them in the right balance.

In the case the breath, the right balance is calming bodily fabrication—in other words, calming the impact the breath has on the body. Ajaan Lee analyzes this into different levels of breathing. There's ordinary or coarse breathing, as he calls it, then there's a more refined breathing, and then there's subtle breathing. The refined breathing consists of the refined sensations you feel going through your nerves, going through the blood vessels, going through your muscles, as you breathe in, as you breathe out, some of which are affected by the in-and-out breath directly, and others that seem to be independent.

As you allow the in-and-out breathing to calm down, you become more and more sensitive to this other level of breathing, which is always there. You get a clearer sense of these waves of breath energy going through the body. Then you allow those to calm down as well and you come to a subtle or profound breath

that's actually still. It doesn't exert any pressure on any part of the body at all. See if you can tune in to that.

In this way, you've learned a lot not only about the fact that the breath does have an impact on the body, but how you can gain some control over that relationship, to give yourself a calmer and calmer place to stay right here.

So the pattern is: sensitize yourself to how this aspect of your awareness has an impact on other aspects of your awareness, as a form of fabrication; use it to energize yourself; and then use that knowledge to calm things down.

There are similar principles in the other tetrads as well. In the second tetrad, you start out learning how to breathe in ways that give rise to feelings of rapture and ease. The rapture is energizing; the ease is more calming. Then you notice how those feelings, together with the different perceptions that go along with the breath and the feelings, have an impact on the mind. These are mental fabrications, the Buddha calls them. Then you learn how to calm the mental fabrications. In other words, where there's pain, you try to turn it into rapture; where there's rapture, you might want to turn it into pleasure. Then there's the very subtle pleasure of equanimity.

These are all things you can play with. Again, if you couldn't play with them, you wouldn't be able to know them. Breath meditation is not a matter of just watching whatever comes and whatever goes. There was once a time when the Buddha was advising the monks to practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "Oh, I practice breath meditation already." And the Buddha asked him, "What kind of meditation do you practice?" The monk said, "Well, I try to remain calm and equanimous about thoughts of the past, calm and equanimous about thoughts of future, and calm and equanimous about the present moment, as I breathe in, as I breathe out." And the Buddha said, "Okay, there is that kind of breath meditation, but that's not the kind that gives the best results." The one that gives the best results is the one when you're training yourself to sensitize yourself to these different aspects of the mind as it's present with the breath. You have to experiment to gain a clear sense of what causes what.

Discernment in the Buddha's teachings is always very pragmatic. To be pragmatic, you have a clear sense of cause and effect. Ajaan Lee makes a similar point. He says discernment comes from experimenting. He says, suppose you have some silver in your pocket. All you know that it's silver. But if you take it and melt it, you can make it into the different things. That's when you really understand silver.

This principle applies to knowledge in all fields. Like cooking: You don't really understand eggs until you've tried to make different things from the eggs, such as

omelettes, and soufflés, steamed eggs, fried eggs. There are culinary institutes in France where they actually have scientists working on eggs, to see what the difference is between a soft-boiled egg and a hard-boiled egg. It turns out it's not the length of time that you boil it, it's the temperature. If you keep the temperature at certain level well below boiling, you get a soft boiled egg. No matter how long you keep it at that temperature, it's not going to get hard. They learned this by experimenting.

In the same way, the only way you're going to see cause and effect in your mind is by experimenting, as when you experiment with the breath, seeing what impact it has on feelings—both physical feelings and mental feelings—and then watching what impact it has on the mind. This is what it means to see things as dhammas. This is why the first three tetrads lead inevitably to the fourth. The texts say that you can take any one of the tetrads and take it all the way to awakening. But you can't help but spend some time in the fourth, which means looking at things as dhammas and then noticing how inconstant they are, regardless of how steady or glad you can make the mind or how, through the practice of concentration, you can release the mind from, say, a factor of a lower level of concentration or the things that keep it from concentration to begin with. In other words, when you get to the first jhana, you've released the mind from sensual thoughts, you've released it from what they say are unskillful mental qualities, which the texts define as wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong all the way down the line through the wrong factors of the eightfold path. Once you release the mind from those things, you're there in the first jhana.

But that has directed thought and evaluations. So, after the mind has set a while—the same way the concrete sets after it's been poured and finally gets hard enough that you can take away the mold—then when the mind is still enough with the breath, you don't need the directed thought and evaluations. So you drop them. You release the mind from those factors. And so on up the line.

But to get ultimate release, you have to see that even the stages of concentration you can bring the mind to in these ways require some fabrication. You have to keep at it. You have to intentionally keep it there, even if the intention is very subtle. Sometimes it's so subtle you can't even see it, but it's there. Regardless of how solid a state of concentration may seem, the Buddha doesn't ask you to see it as, say, a ground of being or anything of those metaphysical terms. It's simply a result of actions, and you want to look to see: Where are the actions? Where is the intention? Then you begin to realize at some point that regardless of how steady the intention may be and how skilled you may be, there's still going to be some wavering, there's still going to be some

inconstancy there. The happiness you gain from these things is still not the ultimate.

That leads to a sense of dispassion. When you no longer have the same passion you had for getting the mind constructed in this way, when you reach that point where you realize that no matter which direction you intend, there's going to be some stress along with that inconstancy, and you can find the point where there's no intention of any kind: That's when things cease. With that cessation, you give up not only unskillful things but also even the skillful elements of the path.

That's when things become truly calm. You've been tending the mind toward calm all the way along, allowing it to appreciate what a greater sense of happiness there is when things grow calm, even just the calming of breath or calming of feelings. It's not boring or dull, the way you may have thought before. There's a great sense of well-being that comes with that sense of calm.

At this stage you've attained to the ultimate calm, where there's no fabrication at all. You let go of everything. The term is that you relinquish it. You give it back. All those things you claimed as you and yours, you don't need to claim anymore. You give everything back.

So each of these tetrads, each of these sets of four, is related to the others. You may be focusing on the body or focusing on feelings but it's hard to be exclusively focused on them. After all, there are connections among these things. An important part of seeing these things as dhammas is to see the connections.

So it's simply matter of which frame of reference is primary, the one that you hold to as your basic reference and then you notice how other things relate to it. If you're holding on to the breath, you notice how feelings are related to the breath, what the feelings do to the breathing, what the breathing does to the feelings, what the mind does to the breathing, what the feelings do to the mind, how subtle intentions are related to the breathing. Even when you get the breathing really, really still, the intention to keep it still, to create a sense of calm, is a fabricated kind of calm. When you finally decide that's not refined enough, okay, then you can go further.

But it all heads into the same direction and all follows the same pattern: sensitizing yourself to that aspect of the present moment, learning to view it as dhammas, fabrications, cause and effect operating right here, right now, and seeing how you can learn to master that pattern of cause and effect to bring the mind to true calm. That's the important lesson to take away from all this.

This is how those different tetrads fulfill the factors of awakening. You're mindful, then you see things in terms of dhammas—cause and effect, skillful and unskillful—and then you work at making everything skillful. This first gives rise to

a sense of rapture, then the body and the mind calm down: serenity, concentration, equanimity. The equanimity goes through many stages until it yields what's called non-fashioning. Nothing being done at all. You're not making any self out of things. You're not making any world out of things. It's just dhammas, and you let them all go. That's where there's true knowledge and release.

So, tonight is the night that the Buddha gave his talk: the full moon night in November, the very end of the rainy season. It's the time of year in India where the moon is the clearest. There may have be some intentional connection there. The Anapanasati Sutta is one of the few suttas that tell us what day of the year the sutta was given. There's the clarity of the moon. They say that this is also time when the water lilies bloom. I went to India one time, and it was about this time of year. Water lilies were everywhere. At night, it's really lovely. You've got a clear moon in the sky. You've got the white water lilies reflecting the moon, and both reflected in the water. It's a nice symbol for the mind that reaches fullness and clarity through the practice of breath meditation, and for the heart that blooms through the meditation.

So see if you can gain that clarity of mind, that blooming quality of the heart, as you get more and more settled here in the present moment.