

An Exercise in Freedom

July 6, 2010

We're here meditating because we chose to be here meditating. It's good to keep that fact in mind. We're exercising our freedom, our freedom of choice. And it's the exercise of our freedom that gives us a lot of joy.

When people get into depression, it's because they don't see any choices. All the avenues are blocked, and they don't have any way of getting past the block. They say that in depression your sense of your self begins to wither away, but not in a healthy way. It withers in that you don't see you have any capabilities, any competence, any powers that really matter. So you just lose the will to do anything at all.

The Buddha never encouraged that kind of attitude or that kind of withering the self away. He actually encourages you to develop as many capabilities as possible, particularly in exercising your control over your own mind. He talks about developing the craving that puts an end to craving, the conceit that puts an end to conceit. In other words, you develop a strong sense of self in the sense that you've heard of other people who've been able to put an end to suffering, and you figure, "They can do it. They're human beings. I'm a human being, why can't I do it?" That type of "I" is a very important one to maintain.

Then there's what the Buddha calls the self as a governing principle. Once you've started on the path and your conviction begins to waver, or your energy begins to fall slack, you remind yourself, "Do I really want true happiness?" And you realize that if you really loved yourself, you'd have to answer Yes. So for the sake of your true happiness, you want to keep practicing.

In other words, you have the "I" as the producer of happiness, or the potential producer of happiness, and the "I" as the potential experiencer of that happiness. And the Buddha encourages you to develop both these two identities.

You develop them through exercising the powers of the mind, which is what we're doing as we meditate. The mind is capable of developing mindfulness, alertness, conviction, persistence, concentration, discernment, goodwill—all kinds of good qualities. The more you exercise these qualities, the greater your range of freedom, the greater your range of choice.

But the Buddha starts with basics. He starts with a basic problem that's totally self-evident, that there *is* suffering and we don't like it. There's stress, there's whatever you want to call it, the sense of the mind's being burdened. The chant we had just now, the Buddha's first sermon, starts out with the issue of, one, the fact that there are paths of practice that actually go someplace, and the question of which path goes to the best goal. He talks about the middle way, developing all the eight factors of the noble path from right view on through right concentration. Right view starts right in with the issue of suffering. There is stress, there is

suffering, there is pain. He's not saying *life* is suffering. He's just saying simply that there is suffering. We can't deny that. And from the very beginning we've never liked it. So it's not that he has to convince us of a lot of ideas about what's wrong with your life. He just points out the fact, okay, there is suffering, there is stress. Then, more importantly, he identifies what it is, so that we can do something about it.

We start on a very basic level: looking at our actions. And a good place to look at our actions is how we breathe. There are processes the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. And they all hover around the breath. In fact, the breath itself is the bodily fabrication, it's what creates our sense of the body. If the breath weren't coming in, going out—if the breath energy weren't flowing through the nerves—we wouldn't even know we had a body. So the breath is our first experience of the body and it fashions all our other experiences of what it feels like to have a body or to feel the body from inside.

Then there's verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation—and he has you bring those to the breath, too. Keep directing your thinking to the breath, and watch it: See how it comes in, how it goes out. And evaluate it: Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? Here's one place where you can really exercise a lot of freedom. You can breathe in all kinds of ways. It's a real shame that we allow ourselves to breathe in uncomfortable or unhealthy ways. Nobody's forcing us. It's simply through lack of attention, lack of understanding, that we don't really develop this part of our experience.

So here we have the chance. Notice where you feel the breathing. Where are the sensations that tell you: "Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out"? And do they feel good? How does your torso feel? How does the area around your heart feel? Does it feel tightened? Can you think of it opening up? Your face, your neck, your spine: Survey all around the body to see how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Notice where you may be holding on to tension, or there may be a sense of blockage.

Sometimes you might discover, as you go through the body, that certain parts seem to be missing. You can't locate where your shoulder is or where your elbow is. Okay, trace it out, where is it? What are the sensations that correspond to the shoulder and the elbow? They've got to be there. It's just that sometimes we allow the different patterns of tension in the body to block things out.

And finally there are mental fabrications: your feelings and perceptions. Perceptions here are the labels that the mind applies to things. For example, there may be sensations in the body that you've assumed to be solid sensations but when you look at them more carefully, you realize there's breath energy flowing in there. That means you have to change your perception. Or look at the mental picture you have in your mind as to what's happening when you breathe.

If you feel that you've got this huge body and only these tiny two little holes in your nose to breathe through, the body's going to breathe in a certain way. And there's going to be a lot of

tension in that kind of breathing. But if you remind yourself that the body has pores all over the skin and there is an oxygen exchange going on at the pores, that changes the dynamic. They discovered this when they put body makeup on people to make them look like statues: If they cover the whole body, the people faint. The pores are blocked. They're not getting enough oxygen. So when you breathe in, think of the breath energy coming in and out all the pores of the skin. See what that perception does to your experience of the breath.

What you discover is that you've got lots of opportunities here, lots of things to choose from: different ways of breathing, different ways of thinking and evaluating about the breath, different ways of perceiving the breath. You want to explore those possibilities. It's an exercise in freedom, and it's a freedom that gives joy to the mind.

We're not just automatons. We're not stuck in a hopeless grind. There may be a lot of things out in the world that we can't do anything about, but there are areas inside the mind where we *do* have a lot of room for exploration, a lot of room for exercising our freedom of choice. All of the Buddha's teachings are an exercise in freedom.

He starts with the principle of giving. If you really give something—not because it's somebody's birthday or it's Christmas or you feel you owe something to people, but simply when you see that somebody needs something or would like something and you have the wherewithal to give it—one of the reasons that's joyful is because of the sense of freedom that goes with it. You have more than enough, and you're not simply being driven by your selfish drives. In fact, when the Buddha wants to emphasize the principle of freedom, he starts with the fact of giving.

The precepts, too, are a kind of gift. You give safety to all beings simply by making up your mind that you're not going to do anything harmful. You're not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie to anybody, take any intoxicants. Once that promise to yourself becomes universal—i.e., you apply it with everybody—you're giving universal safety. They may not be safe from other people, but at least they're safe from you. And that's a gift.

And again, you exercise your freedom that way. You realize that you don't have to keep harming people in the old ways you used to. So there's freedom there. The precepts may sound like rules that bind you, but they're actually an expression of freedom, an exercise in freedom: developing your freedom of choice, your freedom to look at things in terms of the long view and not be tied down to what may seem to be your immediate interests.

Meditation, of course, is the ultimate exercise in freedom, starting with the freedom of being able to choose: Do you want to breathe in now? Or do you want to breathe out? Do you want to breathe long? Do you want to breathe short? Fast? Heavy? Light? Slow? All kinds of breathing. How do you want to perceive the breath? What do you want to do with the breath energy? Can you make the breath energy go down in the body? Can you make it go up?

Ajaan Lee talks about all kinds of ways of conceiving the breath energy and then playing with it. If your back feels weak, think of a strong breath energy coming up from the soles of the

feet through the legs and up the spine. If the front of your neck feels tense, think of the breath energy coming in from the back. There are all kinds of ways you can play with the energy.

This way, the mind is not simply being tied down to an object. It's being allowed to explore this object, to play with it, to exercise your freedom of choice. And that right there should give a sense of joy: that you're stretching your possibilities and you're capable of more than you thought you were.