

Basic Breath, Basic Insight

October 21, 2010

Just now we had a chant expressing goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for all beings: “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” That chant has several purposes. One is to get our motivation straight. In other words, we don’t want to act in a way that’s going to harm anybody—in particular, we don’t want to harm their true happiness. We also want to act in a way that’s going to give rise to true happiness within ourselves.

We want a happiness, in other words, that doesn’t conflict with anybody else’s true happiness, and that has to be something found within. If our happiness depends on things outside, other people may want those things, and either they get them and we miss out, or we get them and they miss out. And even the people who gain those things—gain those relationships, gain those positions of power, whatever—won’t be able to keep them forever. So the happiness that depends on things outside isn’t really true and it brings about conflict. So you want to look inside. You have to develop your inner resources in order to find a happiness that’s not going to change, that’s not going to turn on you. That’s why we meditate.

What are these inner resources? For starters, you’ve got the breath. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind thinking and aware. So for these resources to develop, you bring them all together. It’s like trying to get a seed to grow into a plant. If the seed just sits there in a little plastic bag without any water, without any sun, without any soil, it’s not going to grow. You need to give it the nutrients that would come from the soil. You need to give it light. You need to give it water. In other words, you bring all these things together and then you keep them there—together. And the seed will sprout.

In the same way, you want to plant your mind here in the breath so that it stays in the present moment. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body—because the breath isn’t just the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the whole movement of energy through the body that accompanies the in-breath and accompanies the out-. Notice where you feel that—and also notice if it’s comfortable. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change.

You could try in short and out long, or in long and out short, or in short and out short, deep or shallow, heavy, light, fast or slow—any combination of these.

And, of course, short and long have lots of gradations, as do deep and shallow, fast and slow. Try to adjust things so that they're just right, so that the breath feels energizing if the body needs energizing, relaxing if it needs relaxing.

Think of it as a whole-body process. You may want to focus most of your attention on one spot. It could be at the tip of the nose, the middle of the head, the middle of the chest, at the abdomen. But at the same time, you want to be aware of the whole body—all through the in-breath, all through the out-. If it's hard to stay aware of the whole body, at least keep that concept in mind that you want to build up to that.

You may be able to focus on one section at a time—like the whole abdomen or the whole chest or the whole head. Then go through the body like that, section by section, to familiarize yourself with how the breathing process feels.

You find that even in your legs and arms there's a subtle energy flow that accompanies the breath. If you don't sense it yet, just keep your mind open to the possibility that it's already there. Focus on the places where you do have breathing sensations. Keep watch over them, because sometimes a certain rhythm will feel good for a while and then it doesn't feel quite so good. It becomes mechanical or forced, which is a sign that the body's oxygen needs and breathing needs and energy needs have changed. So adjust things again. Then, when you've found something good, just stay with it.

If the mind wanders off, bring it back gently but firmly. In other words, you don't yank it back and scold it. But at the same time, you do bring it back and try to keep it here. It's a good idea to reward it each time it comes back. Ask yourself, "What kind of breath would feel really good right now? Just one really, really good breath: How would that feel?" See how the body responds. Then, when you've found something that feels really good, why abandon it? Just stick with it. If the mind wanders off again, bring it back again.

Don't get discouraged, because the mind is used to wandering. That's what the word *samsara* is all about. The mind wanders around. If you were to keep a map of where your mind has gone in the course of the day, it'd look like something a child has scribbled all over a piece of paper. It wanders pretty aimlessly, pretty erratically. And it's used to doing that. So we're teaching it a new habit here—how to stay still, with the body, with the breath.

You want to be mindful and alert. "Mindful" here means keeping in mind the fact that you're going to try to stay here, making sure the mind remembers to stay with the breath. And you want to be alert to see what you're actually doing. If the mind wanders off, notice that fact and bring it back. While you're with the breath, try to be alert to how it feels. The more sensitive you can be to the breathing

process, the more interesting it becomes. The more interested you are, the easier it is to stay.

As you begin to sense some of the subtleties in the breathing that you didn't sense before, you may notice areas where it feels blocked, or parts of the body that seem to be cut off from the breathing. Well, think of them opening up. Say, for instance, that your shoulder doesn't seem to be involved. Think of the breath energy flowing through the shoulder. Just hold that image in mind: that there is breath energy coming through when you breathe in, coming through when you breathe out, even if it's very subtle. Just open that possibility in your mind.

Then there's a third quality that the Buddha recommends, and that's ardency. You try to do this really skillfully. As soon as you've noticed that the mind has wandered off, you bring it back right away. You don't say, "Well, wait a minute until I've finished this thought. Then I'll come back." Because usually that thought ties into another thought and then another thought. It just keeps wandering off to who knows where. So stop the thought mid-sentence. Just drop it, no matter how important or wonderful or necessary it may seem. It's not what you want right now. You're trying to train the mind in new skills.

While you're with the breath, ardency means trying to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels, as sensitive as possible to how you can adjust the breath in a way that really does feel good, because sometimes when you adjust it, you can be too heavy-handed. You can force the breath in ways that end up creating a headache or a backache or whatever. So try to be sensitive to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. The more sensitive you are, the better the results: a sense of ease, well-being, openness. Even though you're adjusting the breath, you're trying to give it some freedom at the same time, so that it does feel nourished.

And that's basically all you have to do. It's simply a question of learning how to do it more and more skillfully.

It's like learning how to play the piano. They have you work on your scales, and at first the scales are pretty boring. But then you begin to realize that a lot of the music that you like actually has scales in it. If you can play that scale really well, the music will sound really good. So you work on making the scales sound smooth and even. You find that even something as basic as a scale can be done with greater and lesser levels of skill. In other words, you learn to listen to your playing and then adjust things.

It's the same way you learn to listen to the breath and to your own mind, because sometimes a certain way of breathing that might feel good for the body is a little bit too subtle for the mind to stay with or too harsh or whatever. So you

have to make adjustments there as well. What kind of breathing is easy to stay with, easy to follow?

If it feels as if the body would like to stop breathing for a while, that's okay. Let it stop. It's not going to die. The more the mind grows still, the more subtle the breath can become because you're using less oxygen. If the body needs more oxygen, the body will respond. It's hard-wired to do that. So if it seems as if the breathing stops every now and then, don't worry, just as long as you're not forcing it to stop. It'll pick up on its own when it needs to.

Your only duty is to make sure that the mind stays with the breath, which is the basic skill in meditation—getting the mind to stay here in the present moment. The breath is a good anchor because there is no such thing as a future or past breath that you can watch. If you're with the breath, you know you're in the present. And when you're in the present, you can begin to see the movements in the mind in the present.

In the beginning, it's enough just to *see* the movements of the breath. As the breath settles down, the movements of the mind become more and more apparent. This is where you begin to gain some insight into how the mind moves. When it's moving, when does it move in ways that are actually conducive to a sense of well-being, and when are its movements not so conducive? How does it talk to itself? What plans does it make? What intentions does it act on? What states of mind does it really like? What states of mind does it not like? You can start seeing this because you're right here to watch it as it's happening. Otherwise, the mind goes off into thought worlds. They're like little bubbles it blows and they go off into the past or off into the future. And some bubbles are nice to be in and others are not so nice, but they all end up popping in the end.

You're much better off here, even though in the beginning it seems like you're trapped here in the present moment. That's because you don't know it well enough. The better you get to know the present moment, the more you can make it comfortable—the more you can make it a good place to stay. And the more stable you are here, then the more subtle things you can begin to see as they happen.

You begin to gain some insights. And there's a certain pattern to these insights. Ajaan Mun, the founder of the kammattana tradition, the forest tradition, once said that everybody's all alike, but they're all different. But when you come right down to it, he concluded, they're all alike. He said this to my teacher, Ajaan Fuang. Ajaan Fuang reported this to me. He said you have to think about this to get at what Ajaan Mun meant. The basic problems in the mind are all the same for everybody, but the way we have to tackle them will vary from

person to person. But what it comes down to is that we all want happiness. We all have that in common. We all go off in different ways trying to find happiness. And we've all learned different skills, things that work sometimes but not other times. Some of the habits we've picked up don't really work at all. Even though we all want happiness, and all of our actions are based on a desire for happiness and well-being, some of them end up creating a lot of suffering. That's the big issue.

As for the particular ways we do that—as Tolstoy once said, “Happy families are all alike. Unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way.” We all create suffering for ourselves in different ways based on different assumptions, different ideas of what happiness would be and how we can go about finding it. Meditation gives you a good opportunity to look at exactly where you're making your mistakes. The only reason we would create suffering is because we're ignorant. We don't know what we're doing. We haven't figured out what would really work. This is one of the reasons why we come into the present moment: to watch what we're doing and to figure out what's working and what's not.

There are basically five steps in developing insight. The first two are just to notice as different mental states arise and pass away, noticing which states carry the most stress and which states carry less stress. You also want to notice, though, which ones you're actually actively creating in the present moment and which ones are coming in from other influences: your past actions. It's not that things arise and pass away in the mind just willy-nilly without your participation. Some things do, but other things don't, and the things that really cause suffering to the mind are the ones that you're actually participating in.

A thought may appear in the mind and, on its own, it would just appear for a second and then disappear. But you pick it up. You want to run with it or, as they say in Thai, you want to continue weaving it. It's like a basket that's half-woven and you just continue the weave. That's what you've got to watch out for, because that's the part that's adding more stress to the mind. So you ask yourself, “Why are you doing this?” There are some benefits that you get from it. There is some pleasure you get from weaving these things. Or you've gotten pleasure from weaving these things a certain way in the past and you expect that what worked in the past should work in the present. Whether that's really appropriate or not, whether it's true or not, though: That's often the big issue.

We picked up a lot of our habits when we were young and pretty ignorant. Something may have seemed to work, but it won't work always. Like the Thai story about some farmers who come into town for the very first time in their lives and see their very first flashing neon sign. They happen to see it when the sign is on. So one of them goes off and blows on it and it happens to go off at the time. So

he thinks, “Ah, I blew out the sign.” In other words, we don’t really observe cause and effect very carefully, so we have some very strange ideas about how things are connected. So as we meditate, we want to watch: Does this particular way of thinking really lead to happiness, or is it going to lead to something else? And if it’s not leading to happiness, is there an alternative? The whole point of the meditation is that there are alternatives.

So the insight involves seeing the advantages you seem to get, or the gratification you get out of a certain way of thinking. And this can apply to all kinds of unskillful things as well as skillful things. We do get gratification out of greed. We do get gratification out of anger—a certain amount. It’s not much, and it’s pretty miserable, but it’s there. Sometimes we get gratification from feeling that we’re victims or gratification from comparing ourselves with other people in a way that makes them look bad. Or we can even get gratification out of making comparisons where *we* look bad. In other words: “No wonder I couldn’t get ahead. I was operating with these handicaps”—whatever.

So you look at the gratification and then you look at the drawbacks as well. Where does this line of thinking take you? You get to the point where you see that the gratification is not worth the pain it may cause, or the mental stress it causes, or whatever the drawbacks may be. That’s where you look for the escape. That’s the fifth thing you want to look at.

You see things arising from a cause—that’s one. Passing away—two. You see what gratification you get out of it—three. You see the drawbacks—four. And comparing the gratification with the drawbacks enables you to develop a sense of dispassion. The half-woven baskets may keep on coming, but you realize, “I don’t want to continue weaving these. I’ve got better things to do.” That’s the escape, the fifth step. You get released from that particular type of suffering, that particular kind of stress.

So that’s the general outline of how we get the mind to free itself from suffering. That’s where everybody’s all alike.

Now the particulars, or the particular ways you have of causing yourself stress and the misunderstandings that you have to correct in order to stop doing that—that’s something that’s particular for each of us, which is why you can’t create a meditation manual or a meditation technique that takes everybody through step by step by step, and they come out the other end with everybody all awakened. Each of us has our own particular ways of causing stress and we need particular types of insights to help us get over those past bad habits.

So the path of insight is a fairly zigzag one. The main outlines are the same for everybody. But the particular course you take through this obstacle course depends on the particular obstacles you've been creating for yourself.

So there's work to be done. We're not here just to relax, although it's an important part of the meditation—to create a space where you feel at ease, where you feel that you can rest, and you can come back to when you need it, because sometimes the insight involves sitting with pain for a while and see how you react to pain—what ways you create extra stress around the pain.

As the Buddha says, having a physical pain is like being shot with an arrow. But then we add several arrows more. We shoot ourselves with more arrows. The extra arrows are the ones that are actually causing the suffering. So sometimes we have to sit with pain to see exactly where we're adding to it. But to make sure we don't feel threatened by the pain, we need a place to rest. The same when we have to work through our mental attitudes, some of which are not all that pretty.

When you start meditating, as Ajaan Lee once said, you get to see your defilements. You get to see your greed, aversion, and delusion, and it's not fun. It's not pleasant. Often the mind wants to pretend that they're not there, or that they're okay, or whatever. None of those attitudes accomplishes much. So you need to get the mind into a good mood where it's willing to look at its own faults and not get all worked up—but more willing to work *through* them so that you can get beyond them.

So it's important that you have a good, solid place to stay right here in the present moment. You're not running off into some corner and hiding out from things. You're just staying right here in the present moment, trying to develop a sense of a center where you feel at ease, where you feel solid. Then you can look at things for what they are without feeling threatened by them.

So it's important to be able to relax around the breath in the present moment, to get a sense of ease, well-being, a sense of being nourished and healed by the breath. But it's also important to learn how to use that new center you've developed, to see even deeper into the way the mind causes itself unnecessary stress and suffering, because that act of seeing leads to where the real freedom lies.

As the Buddha said, there are four noble dhammas. The first is virtue, where you learn how to behave in a way where you're not harming anybody. Then there's concentration, where you get the mind centered. There's discernment, when you begin to see what's going on in the mind and understand why the mind is creating suffering and also what you can do to put an end to it. And then finally, there's release: freedom from that suffering. That's what the teaching is all about. As the

Buddha said, that freedom is the heartwood, the core of the teaching. And even though the meditation doesn't create that core, it gets you there.