

## *Breath, Tranquility, & Insight*

*February 3, 2012*

When the Buddha talked about tranquility and insight, he wasn't talking about techniques. He was talking about qualities of mind—qualities that we all have to some extent. The problem is that we don't have enough. That's why we have to develop them. And as we start out to meditate, some of us have more tranquility to draw on, and others have more insight. So we both build on our strengths and try to make up for our weaknesses.

When you look at how the Buddha described breath meditation, you realize he's trying to have you develop both qualities at once. Tranquility is developed by settling in and indulging in the pleasure of stillness. Insight is developed by learning how to look at the process of fabrication. And when the Buddha describes how to do breath meditation in a fruitful way, he's trying to get us to do both.

There was once when he mentioned to the monks that they should practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already do that." The Buddha seemed a little skeptical. He said, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" And the monk said, "I try to let go of any concern with the past, let go of any hankering towards the future, and try to be equanimous to whatever comes up in the present moment, as I breathe in, breathe out." Which sounds like the way breath meditation is ordinarily taught these days.

But the Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not the kind that's going to get great results." Then he proceeded to talk about the sixteen steps in his normal way of teaching the breath. The steps are divided them into four tetrads of four steps each. In all the tetrads he has you try to settle in, to calm things down, at the same time you try to understand this process of fabrication. That's how the steps combine tranquility and insight.

To begin with the body, the first tetrad: Be aware of short breathing; be aware of long breathing; get a sense of how it feels in the body. Then be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. Here he's talking about the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the sense of energy flowing throughout the body. Gaining this large frame of reference, right from the very beginning, is very important. Because as you focus on the breath and it gets more comfortable, it's very easy—if your frame of reference is small—to blur out, to find yourself suddenly someplace else.

It's almost as if, to stay in the present moment, you have to fully inhabit the body in the present moment. Nail your awareness down so that the awareness of your hands is in your hands, your awareness of your feet is in your feet, your head is in your head. Because if your range of awareness gets small, it can very easily slip down the tube into the past or down the tube into the future. If it's too big to fit into the tube, it won't go. So establish this large frame of awareness.

And then the Buddha says try to calm down the process of bodily fabrication, in other words, the way you breathe. Here, he's introducing you to one of the three forms of fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication is your directed thought and evaluation, as when you bring up a topic into the mind and then you evaluate it. This is how we create sentences in the mind, ask questions in the mind. And then the third type of fabrication is mental fabrication, which is composed of feelings of pleasure, pain or neither pleasure nor pain, and then your perceptions. Those things—feelings and perceptions—have an impact on the mind. Perception is different from directed thought and evaluation in that perceptions are not really sentences. They're more like images or single words—like “breath,” or “big,” or “short,” or “long.” Those things remain even as you get past the first jhana.

So as you calm bodily fabrications in that first tetrad, you try to notice: What kind of impact is the breathing having on your sense of the body? And so the word “calming” here actually relates to the same word for tranquility.

But at the same time, you're trying to get to know fabrication. This is the Buddha's technique for bringing the two together. Understand: What is causing unnecessary stress in the body right now? What can you do to minimize that stress? This is going to start connecting with the other forms of fabrication as well. The way you perceive the breath is going to have an impact on how you breathe, and the way you treat feelings in the body.

All too often, if there's a pain in the body, it becomes a wall to your breath energy. You build up a little cocoon of tension around it, and the breath won't flow properly. So try to perceive the breath in a different way, as something that can permeate through the wall of tension and not be affected by it.

As you're working on the breath in this way, you find that you're also working on the feelings. That list of sixteen makes it sound like you're working on 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and you have to go in numerical order. But what you really find as you try to focus on the breath is that you're working on many of the processes at the same time, simply that you're going to be focusing on different aspects. When you're with the breath, feelings and mind-states are right there. When you shift your attention to feelings, it's very much connected with the idea that you want to

breathe in a way that feels refreshing, feels full, so that you're not squeezing the breath energy out as you breathe out, and you're not dragging things in as you're breathing in. You allow the breath energy to have its fullness, to have its space. And you do this in a way that gives rise to ease, pleasure. And then you try to notice the impact that that pleasure has on the mind.

This is where feeling plays its role as mental fabrication. The Buddha says in step 7 that you become sensitive to this process of mental fabrication. How do your perceptions of the breath and of the body, of where you have your awareness, have an impact on the state of your mind?

Then the next step is to try to calm that impact. Make it something you can settle into, to enjoy. At the same time, you're gaining a sense of how you're shaping your experience of the mind through the way that you perceive things, through the feelings you focus on, or the feelings you ignore, or how you relate to the feelings. What happens when the sense of ease is in one part of the body? Can you spread it to the other parts? If it runs up against something that seems to be blocking it, can you let it slip around, like smoke going around a barrier? Or water going around a barrier?

As you get more attentive to how these feelings and perceptions are having an impact on the mind, it moves you into the third tetrad. You're aware of the mind and you're aware of what needs to be done. Is your level of energy down? Do you feel tired, lazy? Discouraged in the practice? What can you do to lift your mind up, to give it a sense of gladness, a sense of well-being in the practice? This may involve the way you breathe. Again, it may involve the way you perceive the breath, the feelings that you encourage by the different ways that you breathe.

Or there are cases where you've got to put the breath aside for a time being, and start thinking about perceptions and verbal fabrications that give you more energy in the practice, that make you happy to be here, such as thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha: how lucky we are that we have a teacher like the Buddha, how lucky we are that the Dhamma is still alive. Think about the members of the monastic Sangha you find inspiring. Or you can think about your own generosity or your own virtue, the good you've done in the world, the bad things you could have done but you decided not to on principle. This gives you a sense of your own worth, your own dignity as a person. It gives you a sense of competence that you can handle these things. When you find that it gives rise to a sense of well-being, then you can come back to the breath.

That's for when the mind needs more energy. Then there are times when the mind has too much energy and it needs to be settled down, made more steady. If it's flying all over the place, what can you do to steady the mind? One thing you

can do is to use that energy to be more precise in how you notice how the breath energy is going through the body. Go through each of your toes, all the joints of your fingers, all the little muscles in your face, all the little muscles in your ribs, the areas that you tend to ignore, all those little tiny muscles down around your tailbone. Get very precise and very methodical. In other words, put more energy into your evaluation of what's going on. After all, you've got the energy, so put it to good use.

Or you can think about the other elements in the body that you experience along with the breath. There's the earth element, the sense of solidity, which gives you a sense of being grounded. If your mind refuses to settle down, you might use some of the contemplations or recollections that are a little bit more brazen. Think about death. It can happen at any time. Are you prepared for it? Suppose that the Buddha is right, that death is followed by new birth, because of the birthing habits the mind has all along. In other words, it grabs onto every piece of clinging and craving that can take it someplace. So how can you expect that the mind won't do that at the moment of death? Are you prepared that when you're feeling desperate, the moment you know you can't stay with the body any longer, you're not just going to grab at whatever comes? There's a lot to prepare for. Are you ready to go?

It could happen at any time, you know. It could happen without warning. A little blood clot wanders around and gets lodged in your brain, and that's it. It gets lodged in your heart, it gets lodged in your kidneys, and that's it. Are you ready for that? This kind of brazen recollection helps settle you down, gets you a little bit more sober, realizing that important work needs to be done and it's got to be done as soon as possible. You've got the opportunity right now, so let's do it.

So, you're using verbal fabrication, you're using mental fabrication, you're using bodily fabrication to bring the mind into a state of balance.

The same with that last step in that tetrad, which is to release the mind. *Releasing*, here, can mean anything from simply releasing it from unskillful thoughts all the way to releasing it from the factors present in lower levels of concentration to bring it to very subtle states of concentration. The things that are weighing the mind down: What can you do to let go of them? The things that are getting in the way of settling down, the things that provide unnecessary tension, unnecessary stress in the body or in the mind: What can you do to think of them dissolving away so they're not a burden anymore? Again, this can involve the way you breathe, the way you relate to the feelings, the way you picture the whole process to yourself and then evaluate it.

So, what you're doing here is that you're using fabrication to settle the mind down in freedom, and, in the process, you're getting more sensitive to the process of fabrication, seeing how much your experience of the present moment really does depend on your present intentions, how you shape things from the raw material that's coming in from your past kamma. This is how tranquility and insight are developed together.

Ultimately, they lead to that last tetrad, where you step back from all of this and realize that no matter how good the concentration gets, it's still fabricated. Now, for a long time in the practice, that fabricated ease is going to be good enough. But there will come a time when your sensitivities gets sharpened and you start developing a sense of dismay or disenchantment around the concentration—that no matter how good it's going to get, it's still just fabricated. It has to be maintained. It's going to end someday. What can you do to go beyond that? You notice how inconstant these things are. And from inconstancy you go to the sense of stress, to the point where you don't even want to identify with these things anymore, even the best state of well-being that can be attained through concentration. As you develop dispassion in this way, you begin to realize that the whole reason you were fixing your food was because you wanted to eat it. When you get dispassionate for the food of concentration, you lose your interest, and that allows it to stop. Then you don't replace it with any other intention. You give everything back. Instead of this constant feeding, feeding, feeding, you let go of all things. And you discover that even the path: You let go of that, too, at that point.

This is how breath meditation gives great benefits, as the Buddha said. You're developing both tranquility and insight at the same time, in a way that's really liberating.

So we're not just hanging out in some nice peaceful state in the present moment. We're here for strategic purposes, to develop our serenity and tranquility on the one hand, but also to develop our insight on the other. We do this by approaching the issue of being at peace in the present moment as a skill. It's one thing to hang out with something that's calming, but it's another to gain insight into how you're actually shaping your experience right now, and how you can shape it more skillfully, and what the limits of that skillful shaping can be, to the point where you thoroughly understand fabrication and can let it go, because you've seen how good it gets, and that it's not good enough.

The peace that comes from that is much different from simply hanging out in the pleasant place in the present. It actually takes you outside of time and space. That's where the actual deathless is found.

So try to keep the Buddha's steps in mind because they really are beneficial, they really do make a difference. They're not just a pleasant place to hang out. They are that, but they're more. How much more, you have to find by putting them into practice.