

## *Mindfulness of Breathing: Four in One*

*May 30, 2019*

Focus on your breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't, try to breathe in another way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure, a sense of ease. You don't have to force the breath into the body. Think of the body as being all energy. You're not having to push air into something solid. You're allowing energy to flow into energy.

Try to keep your mind with the breath. Remember to stay here—that's what mindfulness is all about, remembering. And then be alert keep watch over all this—the breath, the feeling of pleasure, your mind staying with the breath or not staying with the breath. If it's not staying with the breath, bring it back. If it comes back easily, that's fine. If it doesn't come back easily, you have to figure out why.

You've got four things going on here: you've got the breath, you've got the feeling of pleasure, you've got the mind focused on the breath, and then you've got this quality of looking at all of this. Those four things correspond to the four frames of reference in establishing mindfulness. Now, if things are going well, you don't have to think about all four. Actually, you try to bring them all together to be one. It's when things are not going well—in other words, the mind isn't staying with the breath or there's no feeling of pleasure—that's when it's good to analyze things.

This is why, in the factors for awakening—the qualities that help turn mindfulness into concentration—analysis of qualities comes right after mindfulness. As you're mindful of the breath, you're trying to figure out what's going well, what's not going well. If things are not going well, you try to make changes. If they *are* going well, you try to maintain them. Those are the first three factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence, and they correspond to three factors of the path—right view, right effort, right mindfulness. These are the qualities the Buddha said circle around every factor of the path. So right now they're circling around you, circling around your breath, around your body, around the feelings of pleasure that you can gain from the breath, and circling around the mind.

The important thing is to try to make all of this feel like one. It's easiest when the breath feels good. So ask yourself what image can you hold in mind to make the breath feel good. As I said, one possibility is to think of the body as being

energy, and the breath is energy, so the breath flows easily in and out of the body. And it's good to think about the whole body breathing. There are some spots in the body where the breathing is more obvious; others where it's not so obvious. To get the most benefit out of the whole body breathing, though, it's good to go through the body first section by section and notice: When you breathe in, how does that part of the body feel? When you breathe out, how it feel? Try to make a survey section by section of the whole body.

You can start down around the navel, work up through the front of the body, through the neck and the head, and then down the back, down the shoulders and the arms, down the back down the legs out to the tips of the toes. As you focus on each section of the body, ask yourself: What kind of breathing feels good here? If there's any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. Any sense of blockage, think of it dissolving away.

If you want, instead of thinking of the breath coming in and out in from outside, think of the breath as being the energy there in the body that's allowing the air to come in and out, and wherever you're focused, the in-breath starts there. And then notice as the sense of energy flows through the body, where is it blocked? Can you unblock it?

Keep this up until you're ready to settle down. Then choose any spot in the body that feels easy to focus on, where the mind seems naturally to want to center. Focus there and then from that spot spread your awareness out to fill the whole body, so that you're aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, with a sense of ease and well-being. Then try to maintain that.

You've got all four frames of reference going here, and the question is, which one are you going to focus on? The primary one should be the breath. But you also have to notice, is the feeling of pleasure maintained or is it beginning to fade away? As long as you have a need for a feeling of pleasure, try to maintain the pleasure. When it starts getting tedious, then you can let it go.

In other words, the mind begins to get more peaceful. And the breath gets more peaceful because everything is coming together. You're simply hovering around these things, keeping them together, using those qualities, as I said, of mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence, to make sure that everything stays right.

This way, the mind will have to get into concentration. It's there with one object. It's not the case that you don't hear anything outside, or that jhana prevents you from being aware of the world around you. You simply don't pay attention to anything aside from your four frames of reference. You try to develop something good right here: right concentration, which the Buddha said is the

heart of the path. The other factors, he said, are its requisites—things that help nurture right concentration—but the right concentration is the central factor.

You can read about the Dhamma, and have all kinds of ideas about the Dhamma, but if the mind hasn't gotten into good concentration, you don't see clearly what the Buddha's talking about. After all, he gained awakening right here. He was focused on the breath, the mind was solidly centered, and it was from this perspective that he viewed the mind and the world and began to formulate the Dhamma. So to understand what he's talking about, you've got to get the mind here, too.

Another reason why you want to get the mind here is because you're going to see a lot of things coming up in your mind that you don't like, and you'll be learning some lessons of the Dhamma where the Buddha says to let go of something that you *do* like, and the mind has to have a sense of well-being and stability so that it doesn't feel threatened by the things it doesn't like, and it's not so attached to things that it does like—but that are not quite as skillful as you may have thought.

It's easier to accept the things that are unpleasant about your own mind if you have a sense of well-being right here. It's like talking to people about their faults. If they're hungry and irritable, they're not going to want to listen. If they're well-fed and in a good mood, they're much more likely to listen. So you're trying to feed the mind well, to get it in a good mood.

As for letting go, the reason we hold onto unskillful things is because we do get a sense of pleasure out of them of some sort, but if you can give the mind an alternative type of pleasure—like the pleasure that comes from concentration—it's easier to let go of those things. You're not so hungry. You don't feel so desperate.

So bring all your attention right here, get the mind centered right here, and bring everything to one. When you read the steps of breath meditation, there are 16 altogether, and it sounds like an awful lot—so much so, that some people even say that we're not supposed to be focusing on the breath, we're just being aware of the breath in the background as we focus on the topics of the various steps wherever they may go. We're practicing mindfulness *with* breathing, they say, instead of mindfulness *of* breathing.

But that's not the case. When you look closely at the various steps, you see that they all have to do with either the body and the breath, the feelings that arise, the state of your mind, and quality of mind that's watching. There are all these parts, but they all come together right here at the breath—the feelings of pleasure that come from being attentive to the breath, the mind state that's alert and mindful of

the breath, and the mental quality of watching breath, feelings, and mind with equanimity. What this means is that you're trying to take 16 and make them one, centered on the breath. You can think of the 16 if you really want to analyze things out for the sake of discernment. But for the time being let's bring everything together, gather the mind here, give it a place where it can dwell around one thing, the breath. And the more consistently you can stay here, the clearer all those other aspects will become. You begin to see them in good time. There's no hurry to analyze things. As I said, the only time you need to analyze things is when things don't come together. When they do, you can put the analysis down, confident that everything you're going to need to know is going to appear right here. Simply give it time.