

At Ease with the Breath

March 5, 2005

For the mind to be steady, it has to feel at its ease. This is why the Buddha taught so many different topics of meditation. The commentaries list forty in all. Ten recollections, ten contemplations of corpses—some people find that a congenial topic, it's easy for the mind to settle down there, it's really riveting. Then there are the four sublime attitudes, contemplation of food, all kinds of things you can focus on that are congenial for getting the mind to settle in and stay in the present moment and not go chasing off after its thoughts.

So the important principle while you're meditating is to feel at ease with your topic. The breath is a topic congenial for most people. After all, it *is* the force that keeps you alive. So if you're meditating on the breath, try to be friends with the breath, be on good terms with the breath. Allow the breath to come in in a way that feels comfortable, to go out in a way that feels comfortable. Then, as you get more and more familiar with it, you begin to gain a sense of how the breath can become even more comfortable, even more congenial still. The more comfortable the breath, the easier it is to stay with it—as long as your mindfulness is sharp, your awareness is all around.

Sometimes there's a problem when the breath gets so comfortable that range of your awareness begins to shrink. That's because the normal reaction of the mind, when you get really comfortable, is that you're ready to sleep. So you just allow your awareness shrink down, you go into a blur, and you don't know quite where you are. That's why Ajaan Lee recommends that when the breath begins to get comfortable, you spread your awareness to fill the body. And the Buddha recommends that himself: He says to train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out.

There are different ways of making the breath more comfortable. The important thing is that you allow the mind to exercise its ingenuity. Don't think of this as a task. Think of it as something you're playing with. Think back to when you were a kid and you had time to just play around, without any real purpose. You learned to improvise games for yourself, toys for yourself. Try to bring that same sense interest, ingenuity, and enjoyment to the breathing as well, to the meditation as a whole. Because if the meditation doesn't engage your imagination, you're going to have trouble sticking with it.

And if you can't decide what kind of breath feels good, just stay with what you've got. Content yourself with what you've got, and focus on it as continuously

as you can. If you sense any tension coming up in the breath, just allow it to relax. You don't to have develop all sorts of theories about what a good breath would be. Just notice what feels good right now. You'll notice that a lot of the tension tends to seep in when mindfulness lapses, when you're not paying attention. So try to keep your awareness with the breath continuously, as if you were following a long strand of silk. You want the silk to be smooth, you want it to be even, and if any bumps come up, any fraying comes up, then you can stop and sort it out a little bit. Then keep moving on, moving on.

Don't worry about there being any outside judge, judging whether your breath really is comfortable enough or not. If it's comfortable enough for you, that's what matters. After all, this is concentration practice. And concentration is a matter of being steady and at ease with your topic. The more you're on good terms with your topic, the easier it'll be to stay there. If you think of the process as just a lot of work, you're not going to be able to stick with it very long.

Again, think of yourself when you were a child, just playing around. Think of the games you use to invent for yourself—in particular, the games where you started getting interested in something, and followed through with it just for the sheer interest.

They did a study a while back. They had some college students, presented them with a problem, gave them a big sheet of paper, and said, okay, just free associate. Try to think of solutions to this particular problem. And it turned out that the ones who did the best were the ones who, when they were children, had lots of unsupervised playtime, play that had no particular goal in mind, no particular task in mind, no particular structure. And they were able to entertain themselves as kids.

Think of someone learning the guitar without any pressure to perform. They take the guitar into the room and just play around with it, trying this string, trying that string, and over time they begin to learn the guitar in their own way. And that way, they develop a very intimate relationship with it.

So try to approach the breath in the same way, as something you want to get intimate with, something you want to enjoy. And regard this as a game, something you play with. That doesn't mean you're not serious about it, it just means that you have to look at your mind with curiosity, to see what works, what'll keep the mind with the breath. And it has to engage your imagination. Otherwise you're going to leave the breath pretty quickly. But if you find it interesting... The fact that you've got this energy flow in your body, and it reflects your state of mind, and it has an influence on the mind as well as having an influence on the body: How can that *not* be interesting? All you have to do is explore, to see for yourself

what the breath does that you like to the body, and what it does that you like to the mind, and what it does that you don't like to the body and mind. And then let that question itself guide you.

What it'll do is that it'll point you in the direction of the issue of skillfulness. What's a skillful way of breathing, what's a skillful way of thinking, what's a skillful way of focusing on the breath? What ways of breathing, thinking, and focusing are not skillful?

From the issues of skillfulness, you move on to the four noble truths: What causes suffering? What is a path to the end of suffering? You can explain this in terms of definitions and formal doctrine, and sometimes that makes it intimidating. But if you get right down to the whole question of how you like to breathe, then go ahead and breathe that way. After a while, you find that you don't like breathing in that particular way, so just watch it for a while and see what other ways of breathing would be better.

In this way, you get more sensitive to what you're doing in the present. You get a greater sensitivity, also, to the cause and effect that are all happening right here: areas of your awareness that you've overlooked in the past. That's getting you into the four noble truths without you're even thinking about them in formal terms.

There's a whole gold mine right here, a big seam of gold that you've missed. But it's here for you to dig into. Don't regard this as a test or as an onerous task. See it as an opportunity to explore. You've got this whole area of your awareness that you've overlooked, and it has a lot of potential. And right now you've got the time to work with it.

So look at the breath as something you want to explore, look at this time as an opportunity. If you bring the right attitude toward the practice, then this attitude will start showing its results, without your having to ask whether you're in this jhana or that jhana, or whether you've reached concentration or not. Just the fact that you get absorbed in what you're doing: That's the concentration right there.