

*January 27, 2011*

When we focus the mind on the breath, we can observe both of them. Ideally it's good to be able to observe both of them together. Although some people find it easier to observe the breath, others find it easier to observe the mind. But it's important to be able to watch them as they interact.

First, you want to know when the mind wanders from the breath. You want to know when the mind feels comfortable or uncomfortable with the breath, so you can do something about it. There are four steps to breath meditation that focus directly on the mind: being sensitive to the mind as you breathe in, breathe out; gladdening the mind; steadying the mind; and releasing the mind. These four steps basically tell you what you're going to be doing when your frame of reference is the mind.

First, be sensitive to what's going on in the mind. The breath is a good way of doing that. It's very close to the mind. It gives you an anchor, a reference point. Without a reference point, it's very easy for the mind to drift around without noticing that it's drifting. But if you give it a specific task to do, then you can see clearly when it's with the task and when it's not. It's like sitting in a train in a train station. You look over to a train next to yours, and you realize that either your train is moving or the other train is moving, but if you can't see a post between the trains, you have no idea which is which. You need that post as a reference point. The breath provides that post for the mind.

Once you're sensitive to watching the mind, there are three basic activities you can do with it. One is to gladden it. In other words, try to bring the mind's energy level up if it's too low. Another is to settle it down and steady it, when its energy is too erratic, all over the place. Finally, you release it.

Generally, you want to bring the mind into balance before it can be released. There's a popular misconception that awakening is like a neurotic breakthrough. You go through a really bad dark night of the soul and all of the sudden the light opens and everything dark falls away. Although there are few accounts of awakening in the *Theragatha* and *Therigatha* that depict people going through really bad periods before reaching awakening, the general picture in the Canon is one of bringing the mind into balance. That's what the gladdening and steadying are all about. When you find the mind's energy level is low, you've got to bring it back up to the proper level. If it's too high, you bring it back down.

This is reflected in the teachings on the seven factors for awakening. The energizing factors are analysis, right effort, and rapture. The calming factors are calm, concentration, and equanimity. Because these terms are abstract and general, it's up to each meditator to find specific or personal techniques that work for each factor. For example, find some way to get interested in the breath. It helps gladden the mind to remember that it's working on something worthwhile. I found it really helpful when I first got into breath meditation to work with the breath energy at a sore or injured spot. It gave a sense that I was doing something positive and constructive. I could really see some results.

You can think of the breath as a healing process or a rejuvenating process. Ajaan Lee noted that as people get older, the out-breath gets longer than the in-breath, and the energy level of the breathing goes down. You might consciously try to fight aging by doing longer in-breaths and shorter out-breaths to see if the breath can have a rejuvenating influence on the body. Whatever technique you find that gives more energy to your practice is helpful. Ajaan Fuang once said, "You have to be really crazy about this to do it well." Otherwise you might not be paying close attention when things seem to be going okay, and then "okay" begins to get a little loose, shaky, wobbly. That's when you have to heighten your level of involvement and focus. To get very involved in an activity, whether it's sharpening knives or doing carpentry work, could easily be labeled obsessive; but really getting involved with your work makes you better at it.

It's the same with the breath. You want to be really obsessed with exploring what the breath energy is doing in the body, in how it relates to the other elements and sensations in the body. When the breath seems

be going well, can it get better? When the energy level is down, experiment with getting more interested in how the meditation can lift your spirits.

However, if playing with the breath is just getting you more frazzled, that's a sign you need to get the mind steadier. This is when you develop patience, serenity, and equanimity. Whatever comes up in the practice, you're just going to watch it for a while, and not fiddle around so much with the breath. Give everything a chance to settle down and to do its own thing. Slow the breath down. Spread your awareness to fill the whole body, so it can't move so easily back into the past or off into the future.

When the mind is in equilibrium, with the level of energy just right: That's when it's a lot easier to release it from its attachments. Otherwise the release is just aversion, dislike. You're trying to run away from something. You don't like this, you don't like that. You push yourself away. But the pushing becomes another type of becoming. As the Buddha said, craving for non-becoming leads to more becoming.

The image of the middle path can be the middle point of a spectrum or it can be off the spectrum entirely. Release comes in getting off the spectrum. In balancing between excessive energy and deficient energy, you bring the mind into the middle of the path, the middle point of the spectrum. That's the point where you can get off. Most of us think that the jumping-off point is found at the extreme ends. The Buddha, though, says the jumping off point is right in the middle where everything is balanced: tranquility is balanced with insight; the energy feels just right; the levels of desire, persistence, intentness, analysis are all just right as they converge. It's when everything feels balanced, and you're very alert, that you begin to see things you didn't see before. You're in a more neutral position. The neutral position is what allows you to see.

Try to develop specific techniques to bring the mind into balance and to get a sense of where that point of balance is. When is your energy level too high, and when is it too low? Where are the danger points? One is when you've been practicing for a long time and the results aren't coming as quickly as you like. Or things were going well, and now they're not going as well as they used to. That's when you've really got to work at gladdening the mind. When something really good happens and the mind starts generating all kinds of excitement, that's when you've got to steady it, so you can watch what happens next. You don't want to get excited by your insights, because the really useful insights come in watching what happens after an impressive insight. If you're excited by the first insight, you miss the important point: Where does it lead? We're trying to watch cause and effect. When the Buddha boiled down what happened on the night of his awakening, he described it as the discovery of a causal principle. Sounds pretty mundane. But he realized it was essential to his awakening, seeing what caused what, and then how you could manipulate the causes to get the results going in the direction you want them to go.

So when an insight comes, see what happens as a result of having that insight. Don't get carried away by it. Maintain your steadiness. Some very interesting things happen after the initial burst of insight and more subtle insights can arise. Be really careful about the level of balance you maintain. Then you can understand what led you to get latched onto something or led you to get pushed away or bored with something. You see where you can step out a bit of your normal range of choices. That's what the release is all about. You begin to see more choices than you had previously conceived.

Get to know your own mind. Part of being sensitive to the mind is knowing what state it's in, and part is knowing what techniques work for encouraging it and for calming it. Trying old strategies from the past might work now, too, or maybe they won't. Test and watch for a while to see what might work this time until you can bring the mind to that point of equilibrium where the door to freedom opens.