

1. *The Entertaining Breath*

July 19, 2007

Okay, here's your opportunity to focus entirely on the breath. You have no other duties right now, no other obligations. Just put the body in a posture where you don't have to worry about it. Sit up straight, look straight ahead, close your eyes, hands on your lap, right hand on top of the left. And there you are, the breath.

Look at this as an opportunity. You're not tying the mind down to the breath, you're not imprisoning it. Think of this as an opportunity to explore, to see what is actually going on when the breath comes in, when the breath goes out. How does it affect the body? The only way you'll notice that is if you experiment.

Ajaan Lee says it's like getting some silver. You don't really understand silver until you melt it down and try to make different things out of it. That's when you start to understand its properties. In other words, you fool around with it, you play with it. And in the course of playing with it, you learn a lot about cause and effect. At the same time, you can keep yourself engrossed.

This is what the mind likes to do. It like to see relationships. It likes to figure things out. So give it something good to figure out. What's the best way to breathe right now?—*best* being defined as what's most nourishing for the body, feels most comfortable for the mind. *Comfortable* here can mean either relaxed or energized. What would you like right now from the breath? See how you can focus on the breath, just the breath, in a way that gets what you want out of it. Learn now to entertain yourself with the breath.

Ajaan Fuang used to talk about this a lot. He'd say, "Learn how to play with the breath." Now for him, *playing* didn't mean just playing around in a desultory way. For him, playing was like playing the way a skilled athlete would play a game. You try to do it really well. Look at it as a challenge, an interesting and entertaining challenge.

There was once an ajaan in the forest tradition who complained to Ajaan Lee. He heard that Ajaan Lee was focusing on the breath as his main topic for teaching meditation, and this particular ajaan said, "What is there to see in the breath? It's just in and out. How can you gain any insight there?" And Ajaan Lee replied, "If that's all you see, then that's all there is." It depends on what you notice, what you look for, your ability to pose questions.

Years back, I was spending the night in a house out in the woods in northwest Washington. The people who owned the house weren't there, so we had the house

pretty much to ourselves. We noticed they didn't have a TV. What they did have, though, was lots of games, lots of brain teasers on the shelves in the living room, lots of books. In other words, without prepackaged entertainment, they learned how to entertain themselves.

Thomas Mann in his novel *Joseph and his Brothers*, which is his retelling of the Joseph story, when he gets to the point where Joseph is thrown into prison, has Joseph entertain himself by interpreting his own dreams and the dreams of his fellow inmates. After he gets good at it, he starts interpreting the dreams of wardens, on up to the chief warden of the prison. Mann makes the comment that the sign of an intelligent person is the ability to keep yourself entertained even in difficult circumstances.

Of course, what happens in the novel is that eventually the Pharaoh sends out word that he's had a dream that nobody can explain to his satisfaction. The prison warden suggests that Joseph might be a good person to try. And he was right: Joseph interpreted the dream in a way that saved the kingdom. So the game he was playing, the entertainment he improvised, actually proved to have some worth: It got him out of prison, saved Egypt and the surrounding countries, and eventually reunited him with his family.

That's the ideal kind of entertainment, where you keep yourself entertained and you learn, you provide yourself with opportunities. After all, the breath energy is what keeps the body alive. It's what keeps the mind and body together. And it stands to reason that if the breath feels good, it's going to be good for the body, and good for the mind.

If you learn how to understand the breath, you see that it's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the whole energy flow in the body. Some parts flow, some parts are still. When you look at in this way, you realize that there's breath everywhere in the body all the way out to the pores of the skin, all along the nerves and all along the blood vessels. The movement of this energy is what lets you know there's a body sitting here, and keeps circulation going well. Once the circulation is good, then it's less likely that you're going to get diseases. It also makes the present moment a much more pleasant place to stay. Things feel wide open. The body as a whole is breathing in unison. It feels really good.

This is how our focusing on the breath can lead to a sense of fullness in the body, a sense of pleasure, sense of well-being and ease, all of which are factors of the path. Right concentration has among its factors the ease from concentration, the rapture that can arise from concentration, the ability to experience pleasure through the body. You can induce that ease and rapture by getting more interested in what this potential is that you have here.

This is one of the basic messages of the Buddha's teaching on kamma, that the present moment is not totally fashioned by your past kamma. You have choices you can make in the present that have an immediate effect. You don't have to wait till your next lifetime to see their results. The effects can come immediately, which means each present moment has certain opportunities. Now, there may be limitations based on past kamma, our past choices, but within those limitations there's still space to choose what to focus on, to choose how you're going to understand it, what you're going to do with it.

When I was up camping in Canada recently, there were days when the rain lasted all through the day, all through the night. You're stuck in your tent and you could make yourself miserable if you wanted to. But you could also look at it as an opportunity: no responsibilities, all that time to be with the breath. In other words, no matter how bad the situation may be—as in Joseph's case, he was in prison—you've always your breath, and there's always something to learn.

You look at Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks. He talks about the breath energy in the body in lots of different ways. As for Method Two in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, he developed that when he was stuck up in the forest in northern Thailand. He had walked in three days, and he was going to spend the rains retreat in a very remote area where is just a hill tribe nearby. A few days after he got there, he had a heart attack. No doctor, no medicine. He had to pull himself back together again, and he did it by working with the breath energy. The lessons he learned during the rains retreat, putting himself back together so that he was able to walk out at the end of the rains, three days walking through the jungle: Those were the basis for Method Two.

His Dhamma talks in the years after that contain other ways of working with the breath energy that are not described in Method Two. Some of them are in the book *Inner Strength*, some are in *The Skill of Release, Food for Thought*. They basically came from seeing what the body needed, what way of conceiving the breath, what way of adjusting the breath energy, helped for that particular imbalance in the body, that particular problem in the body. He was always willing to learn, always willing to experiment.

So that's the attitude we should have as meditators. There's a lot to learn here in the present moment, there are lots of opportunities. If you look for them, they're there. In this way, the hour of meditation becomes an exercise not in tying yourself down, but in opening yourself up, learning about cause and effect in the mind, because this is not just idle entertainment. Say, you send the breath down to the legs, down to the arms. If you learn about cause and effect, you're headed in the right direction, because that's what the Buddha's teachings are all about:

understanding cause and effect, how the mind creates the conditions for suffering, and how it can create the conditions that lead to the end of suffering. After all, the Buddha, when he boiled down the big message of his awakening, it was an understanding of cause and effect. Some causes give their effects over time; some of them give their effects immediately. If you learn how to understand the connections between cause and effect in the mind, you can direct them in the direction you want them to go: to the total end of suffering. And working with the breath is a good place to start.

So each time you sit down to meditate, look at it as an opportunity. You can give your full attention to the breath, total attention to the way the mind relates to the breath, and then you can play. And through playing around like this, you learn important lessons.

So it's not just idle play. It's an exercise in developing intelligence—in particular, the intelligence that can see the connections between your intentions and the pleasure and pain that you experience. It's all playing out right here, simply a matter of learning how to experiment to see what's connected to what, which choices you make are skillful and which ones are not, and how to motivate yourself to work on being as skillful as possible.

It's work, but it's entertaining work because there are lots of surprises. If you rule out the element of surprise, you rule out any possibility of progress in the path. So think of meditation is an opportunity to surprise yourself and see what happens.